WRACK

AND OTHER STORIES

Dermot O'Byrne.

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WRACK
AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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WRACK AND OTHER STORIES

WRACK

I

The other day I was looking through a spasmodic journal that I kept about ten years ago during a stay in South Connemara. I was just beginning to write at the time, and the pages of this little book are full of my first faltering and uncertain attempts to seize some broken echo of the deep and solemn music that Ireland was pouring into my wakening ears. My boy's mind was like an Æolian harp, swept through mightily by all the eight coloured winds of Erin, and giving forth but a confused and many-toned murmur from amid which it was difficult for my untrained artistry to call forth a coherent music. My diary of that period is filled with the

beginnings of numberless poems and stories, nearly all of which seem to have become hopelessly distraught at the end of a page. But, turning over the leaves of this bewildered phantasmagoria, I found a few notes which recalled to my memory an incident that at the time made a very deep impression upon me.

The page was dated "Roscarn, April 16th, 1902," and the sight of these words evoked at once and with startling vividness the nondescript little room in the house where I lodged,—the only slated house in the street. —the peculiar tone of the evening sky, faces long since forgotten in the mists of time, and in fact almost every circumstance that enshrined that arresting experience.

I suppose that evening I must have become particularly downcast and impatient with the result of some verse that after a day's work appeared ever more leadenfooted and pallid. At any rate I remember stamping off towards the hotel in a foolishly reckless mood, my eyes hot and pricking, every nerve tingling, and my whole being one wicked prayer for any kind of diversion. I knew the hotel keeper's daughters very well, gentle Gaelic creatures who combined

humble hearts and mediæval piety with a treasure of local lore and mild scandal that caused them, I believe, an almost physical uneasiness until communicated to some one. Their melodious and vivacious recitals of these domestic sagas always interested me as revelations of the social complexities of a district that at first glance seems like some unhuman lotusland drowsing eternally in a flood of pale jewelled light, and yet on deeper inquiry is shown to be netted in the strands of politics as entangled as those of any great city.

Entering the glass door of the hotel I was at once aware of an unusual stir and almost immediately heard the unmistakable accents of English tourists. They were asking the way to St Ronan's Chapel, the show place of the neighbourhood, from a flustered little maid whose knowledge of the Beurla was almost wholly confined to the names of traditional articles and implements of table fare.

The voices proceeded from a small room to the right of the hall, and suddenly I became a prey to the idiotic impulse which sometimes assails impetuous natures, filling one with an instant unreasoning good

fellowship and an urgency to strike up a serviceable acquaintanceship with the most unpromising of strangers.

I peered through the crack of the door. There were four of them. A portentous middle-aged person, of the fishing-hotel military type, sustained the greater part of the colloquy, purple faced and laconic, the foolish bluster of his utterances only less amusing than the terrific aggression of his fulminating silences; on the sofa panted a vast and flaccid female, probably his wife, with a face of an immensity and pallid shapelessness unequalled by anything of the kind that I had ever astonishingly encountered, faded hair and a foolish half-open mouth, which, even as I gazed, uttered in a singularly small and stifled voice some incoherent comment, followed immediately by a laugh which seemed to emerge from some perpetually greasy place. Also, with considerable good-nature, she seemed to have accommodated the proclivities of her lord by developing a vaguely-coloured eye of quite remarkable fishiness. By her side stood uncertainly a weedy young man in a flannel collar with a camera slung across his shoulders by a strap and a conscien-

tiously brisk manner of speech, cultivated perhaps to disguise the fact that his large, bony red hands were apparently a continual source of embarrassment to him. His immense Adam's apple was his only salient characteristic, but beyond this I was remotely aware of a partially bald head, streaked with wispy yellow hair, sharp sallow features, and beaming spectacles that diffused a vague atmosphere of rather sickly benevolence. He was the type of young man so often to be remarked assisting in a druggist's shop.

My mood of bonhomie had cooled very rapidly, but still I glanced at the fourth person in the group. This was a girl of about nineteen, the daughter I supposed of the older people. Her eyes—but I saw that she was decidedly pretty at the first glance, and that was enough for me. I entered the room diffidently.

"I will show you the way to the chapel, sir, if you will allow me the pleasure," I said politely.

The martial relic surveyed me up and down coolly for a moment, and then thanked me rather doubtfully and with more than a shadow of condescension.

"That's very kind of you, young man," observed the elder woman in a voice mellow to over-ripeness. "This stupid girl doesn't seem to know anything about it. How far is—this place? I am sure I can't remember these dreadful Irish names," and she subsided into a fit of wheezy laughter, looking round archly upon each of us in turn as though she imagined that she had said something rather clever. The sycophantic spectacles above her beamed.

"About two miles," I replied, already beginning to repent of my rashness. The girl too, I found, was only pretty in a picture post card way.

"I could never do it," announced the lady with decision. "I'm so shaken after that dreadful car drive that I declare I don't know whether——"

But at this point it seemed that her mind became suddenly clouded with lethargy, and the sentence fainted away, whelmed in an immense and vacuous sigh.

"That's right, mamma, you lie down here on the sofa and rest till we come back," said the girl briskly and with evident relief; "we shan't be long. Here's a cushion for you. Is that right now?"

"I hope it's clean," said the other fretfully; "I'm told these Irish hotels——"

"I daresay the pig's been sitting on it, if that's what you mean, but you can't help that in this country," said her husband with a snap.

The girl sniggered.

"Oh, don't, papa! How horrible you are!"

"My God!" I cried inwardly.

II

We set off, myself and the spoilt apothecary leading the way, followed closely by the other two, whose name I gathered was Jackson. My companion was wanly genial and of the earnest and inquiring type. His ignorance of all things Irish was profound, though at first decently draped in a hypocritical humility, and his imagination I quickly discovered as a flowerless desert, choked with the weeds of prejudice in which one became entangled at every endeavour to penetrate that arid waste. He had been a week in the West of Ireland, he informed me, and knowing that two days of Galway's wind and light and rain are sufficient to

fructify the soil of any but a wholly sterile imagination, I saw at once that his case was hopeless and determined to extract as much secret if bitter amusement from the expedition as my position of instructor would afford me. He confided to me that he had heard so much about Ireland that he had decided to come and see for himself. He also submitted with the gracious air of one making concessions that the Irish were a good-natured but improvident race. He spoke of laziness and dirt. I agreed with him, and warming to my task supplied him with an abundant selection of the lies that he wished to hear, how every household in the parish shared its hearths with pigs and cattle, how the children of the district invariably went drunk to school, and kindred picturesque inventions of the kind always so palatable to English taste. He made a clucking sound against the roof of his mouth now and again, and occasionally laughed thinly so that his pale eyes goggled and his Adam's apple became surprisingly convulsed.

As we passed down the unwalled road leading to the chain of bridges that now connect the numberless islands, we encoun-

tered several gaily-shawled country women, barefooted, their short red petticoats kilted to their knees, some of them carrying densely packed turf baskets upon their bent backs. The Gaelic salutations which passed between them and myself created a flutter of astonishment among my companions. They had no idea that any other language than English was spoken in Ireland, and on my acquainting them with the fact that the latter tongue was unknown to many of the older folk the amazement of the young people was evinced in the sudden emptying from their faces of all expression whatever. The Major merely grunted, maintaining a certain aloofness as though to imply that these facts were either too well known or too unimportant to call for comment from such as himself. The photographer glanced at me dubiously and with some resentment. Possibly it had occurred to him for the first time to doubt my entire good faith, even to question my identity with the great nation which in his person he graced.

"How ignorant of them not to know their own language," said the girl pertly, looking more than ever like a picture post card.

Perhaps my face betrayed some of my astonishment at this ingenuous remark, for the Major suddenly saw fit at this point to interpose with an effect that can only be adequately compared with a sudden volley of artillery.

"What I should like to know is this," he boomed, in his best and hoarsest parade manner, "of what practical use is a decayed language like Gaelic (he pronounced it Gallic) to the people? Can you tell me that, young sir?" and he fixed me with a smouldering eye.

I started, and my glance wandered for help to a sky that looked as if some enchanted pearl had been broken in heaven and dissolved through wind and cloud to make more lovely the dimly luminous roof of the world. But the gods were dumb on their dizzy. thrones and in a panic I plunged into a rather incoherent account of the work of the C.D.B. in the locality.

By this time we had left the road and were pursuing the devious and wrack-strewn edge of the sea, following the outside of the loose low stone wall covered with nets and fragments of lobster baskets and fishing-tackle. Within the partially

ruinous wall the last holdings of this ultimate land were strewn sparsely with the blue ashes of kelp. Here and there one perceived the flash of a woman's red skirt and its wearer bowed and staggering beneath an immense weight of streaming sea-weed. The air was acrid with the odour of the yellow, decaying wrack from which swarms of flies rose with a soft hiss as we passed. To our left the sea lay serene like an enchanted mirror reflecting dimly the dove-grey dome of the sky, flecked in places with heavy masses of fleecy cloud like slow wings beating languidly against a jewelled door. The world was infinitely silent, swooning it seemed in wonder of its own beauty.

My companions appeared slightly oppressed by the scene, a prey probably to the vague uneasiness to which the English mind is prone when confronted with anything it cannot understand. They all gave the impression of being very much on their guard, as though suspecting that this subtle and foreign loveliness concealed some ambuscade, the intent of which was to make them appear in some way ridiculous.

The few fisherwomen whom we came

upon stared at us with a frank yet humble curiosity as at lofty and infinitely remote beings fraught with incomprehensible mystery. My party remarked upon this token of ill-breeding and enlarged artificially upon the theme as though in mutual self-defence. With disdain the girl called the attention of her companions to the coarse build of the women, and especially to their thick red ankles chafed with wind and rain and sea.

"What horrible feet they have too," she piped, and shuddered with well-bred affectation, dropping her eyes to the ground.

She raised them again in a moment and instantly uttered a little startled shriek, "Oh, goodness gracious, Bobbie, what's that?" she cried breathlessly.

III

I followed the direction of her scared doll's eyes. Huddled in the shadow of a huge boulder and indistinct in the deepening dusk something was crouching. At the first glance my heart leapt, for the shape seemed scarcely human, yet as we all paused, startled for the moment out of our several

poses, in the stillness a low sobbing murmur became audible mingled with the occasional querulous upliftings of a croaking voice such as could only proceed from human lips. Even as we watched a wild cry came from the figure, which immediately became violently convulsed and scrambled awkwardly on to its feet so that the upper part of the form was silhouetted suddenly above the level of the boulder.

"Pshaw," exploded the Major with a volcanic snort, "it's only an old woman," and he inflated his chest and glared at me with ferocity, as though I, in my position of guide to the party, were in some way responsible for the momentary shock that the apparition had caused him. He puffed out his purple and pendulous cheeks and drew a deep breath.

"Come along, young people," he said irritably, "or we shall not be back from this fool's errand by dinner-time! Damme! Lord bless me! What the devil——"

The old woman, who was stumbling towards the sea, holding her hands forward in an attitude of supplication or offering, had suddenly screamed again more piercingly than before and continued crying in Gaelic

in a loud, harsh chatter. I listened intently, and my companions again became rigid as though petrified at the sight of a Medusa head.

"Ach, yez are come now, my white darlings," wailed the discordant voice. "Take it! let you take it. Sure it's all I have on the ridge of life. Arú, it's ye know well, I'd not be grudging you the cursed viceroy's dinner in Baile-atha-cliath of the spires, only I would be stealing it, or the sweet tasting dainties do be fattening the holy father in Rome itself. Wirra, wirra, it's pale you are, Seaumaisín, my wee pigeon. Mo dhochar, mo leun geur! Oona, little calf of my heart, your share of soft bones do be splitting through your white skin. Eat now, little rats, eat your bellies full," and she threw the contents of her two hands into the tide, and I knew from the sound they made that they were merely stones. A cold chill crept over my whole body.

"Och!" she shrieked, so that we all started again, "let you not be looking on me with that wickedness in your eyes. Sure you know well it was not to harm you I did that thing." She fell to moaning. "They'll not use my food. They'll not use the food

I bring them," and she tossed her withered arms wildly, spreading out her palms to the sky in a mute and desperate appeal to whatever strange shape of deity might be the ultimate light of her crazy understanding. At the same instant her rolling eyes evidently detected us, standing a motionless group staring fixedly at her. Some dishevelled association of ideas, perhaps a vague remembrance of the numerous tales of overlooking and the evil eye with which the winter ceilidhs are sown, and confirmed by our immobility and fascinated gaze, must have suggested to her that we stood in some malign relation to her misery. Stiffening suddenly she uttered a kind of whimpering snarl and at once began to shuffle towards us, one skinny arm outstretched in a gesture of accusation and malediction. The girl with a squeak of fright ran to her father's side and clutched at his arm. The Major, drawing in the corner of his upper lip, gnawed the end of his moustache in obvious embarrassment, whilst Bobbie's callow jaw sagged and his weak, red-rimmed eyes blinked rapidly.

Our assailant halted a few yards from us, a woeful and pitiable figure. She was

clothed insufficiently in a mass of frayed and stained rags such as might be used in another part of the country to deck a scarecrow. Beneath the tattered remnants of a crimson petticoat the thick speckled legs ended suddenly with no discernible ankle in two gnarled and knotted lumps to which the term feet seemed scarcely fitting.

Her head was bare, and her dirty grey hair hung in clotted and greasy wisps down to her blood-shot and rheumy eyes which glared hotly, the only vital thing in a desert face of the colour of mouldering ivory and scoriated into a trackless waste of wrinkles in which the turf dust of years was embedded. Her whole meagre frame was racked and shaken with an intolerable hate, as she leaned forward towards the Major, seeming to spit out her words at him as though they were something foul of which she wished to be rid.

"Arú, there you are, ye old heathen buckallero, you with your big belly, and your cheeks and lugs are heavy with the colour of shame. Don't we know well it's yourself and your like did leave the western world a withered branch with the rank blast of your breath, and did put shortening

of life on the young and a smouldering sod of bitter grief in the brain of the old? It was you ones loosed the hunger on us surely with your bawdy prayers to the son of malediction and did leave me a rag of grief blown in a windy gap. Och! och! that the fleas may chew your eyelids, that the devils of the pit may pour a searing fire into the veins of your black heart, that they may roast your guts on spits at the four gate-posts of hell. Oh, would my tongue were a burning stake and your body stretched out before me on hell's flag-stone!"

The foam frothed on her lips, and I thought she would leap at the man before her, but at this moment a barefooted girl suddenly ran from the door of a cabin hidden among the rocks that hitherto I had not noticed. She hurried up, shouting shrilly, and caught the old woman by the arm, turning her about roughly.

"Come away out of that, ye old strap," she shouted into her face with fierce good humour, "and don't be contending with them. Sure you know well the peelers will be coming on you if you do be tearing away on the naked strand the like of thon, and I tell you them are the lads 'll not be slow

firing yez into the black hole or the poorhouse itself. O Righ Domhnaigh, you're the lassie does be making more trouble than a houseful of weans, and they roaring the world silly with the stress of their share of teeth."

She bestowed on us a quick flash of her beautiful star-like eyes, a glance strangely commingled of shyness and contempt, and scolding without cessation hurried her charge away, the latter grunting and gasping incoherently.

For a few moments none of our party spoke. Then the Major made an impatient gesture, shrugging his shoulders as though by that action disclaiming for ever all responsibility for the accident of belonging to the same species as a people that could harbour so unseemly a phenomenon in their midst. The girl, who seemed completely shaken and not a little shocked by her first obscure contact with stark and elemental passions, still pawed tremulously at her father's arm and murmured something about "that disgusting old woman." My young gentleman stood very quiet and tense, still blinking rapidly and evidently attempting to achieve a kind of mean

dignity in the face of the unexpected. There was that in his weak eyes which assured me that in that very moment he contemplated a pungent note on an incident that he probably connected in some vague way with the notorious lawlessness and depravity of the Celtic race.

I apprehended that they all experienced a species of moral repulsion, as though they had been forced to witness a spectacle of more than dubious decency.

"Well," said the Major sullenly, "we may as well be going back now. If we go on we'll be late for dinner." The other two agreed, and at this point I found an excuse to leave them, I am afraid rather unceremoniously and on very thin pretext. As we took leave they regarded me with a scarcely covert suspicion, evidently possessed with the idea that I was in some way concerned in this plot to overthrow their sleek British self-possession and dignity.

IV

I wandered on alone in the gathering shadows. The stillness seemed even more pensive and pregnant with mysterious

meanings after the obscure tumult of the last few minutes. Far away over the bay the lighthouse at the western end of the Aran Islands opened periodically a golden eye soft and enormous like that of some astonished ocean monster roused out of fabulous broodings. At my feet the stealthy swell and lapse of the slow silken tide seemed more like a continuous soft pulsation than the definite break and subsidence of waves. One or two lights began to gleam with fantastic secrecy among the rocks, and my steps turned almost unconsciously towards one of these. As I approached the door I became aware of the shuffling but strongly rhythmical racket of a weaver's loom.

I stooped my head and entered the cabin. "God bless all here," I called above the cheery din.

"God and Mary be with you," answered a woman's voice. "Sit into the fire and rest yourself."

I thanked the speaker, and after pausing an instant to watch the gaily running threads, moved forward uncertainly into a sea of smoke and the blinding glare of a newly lit lamp.

"Move you out of that, Bridgie," said the same voice in a loud and petulant whisper, and becoming suddenly accustomed to the light I perceived that this command was addressed to a little girl seated on a chair with her feet beneath her and seemingly engaged in a laborious and vain endeavour to count her own fingers. The child slipped off the chair with much display of bare brown legs and curled herself into a corner of the enormous fireplace. Another little girl crouched at the opposite side, and from thence stared at me open mouthed and with immense solemnity as at some portent from another world.

I sat down in the vacated chair and made a few remarks about the lobster catch, which until recently had been unsatisfactory owing to the non-fulfilment of certain real or imagined promises on the part of the C.D.B. Whenever I glanced at the children they became convulsed with silent mirth, wriggling their charming little forms and hiding their mouths in the corners of their pinafores in an ecstasy of shyness.

After a few minutes I led up to the question at my heart. I related briefly my

encounter of the evening and asked if my hosts could give me any explanation of the occurrence. Up to this point, even at my first entry, the weaver had not lifted his head from his work, but now as I spoke the rattling of the loom became slower and gapped with silences, and at my direct question the man of the house left his seat and advanced into the light of the fire. He was a tall, fair man with the narrow head, pale face, long sharp features, and high cheek bones of the Firbolgic remnant. His speech was slow, lazy, and musical, and accompanied by a perpetual flicker of amusement about the corners of his mouth which I think must have been involuntary as it was never absent from him whatever the subject in hand. In spite of his dilatory movements and the almost feminine gentleness of his voice, there was a strange impression of mastery and self-confidence about him, and I noticed that the woman of the house at once surrendered her chair to him and left the conversation entirely in his control from the moment that he entered it.

"Old Peggy, is it?" he drawled, "sure we thought the wide world would be knowing

that one. Oh, she's a curious lassie, right enough!"

"That's the way," he assented to an inquiring look from me, "she's not all in it," and the smile about the corner of his mouth became rigid, giving his face a sudden disquietingly mask-like appearance.

"'Twas in the bad times that fit came on her," he said, addressing himself dreamily to the fire and positively grinning.

"What bad times?" I said, after a moment.

"Arú, the black '47, surely," he answered with a kind of soft impatience.

"Good God!" I exclaimed.

"It's long enough! long enough," he sighed melodiously, staring before him with lost blue eyes, whilst he fumbled vaguely in his pocket for his pipe, and hissed the fragment of a jig tune through his teeth.

He pressed down the half-consumed ashes in the dúidín with nicety and immense deliberation, and then sucked away so abstractedly that I thought he would not speak again. However, he suddenly resumed, the languid swing upwards and downwards of his voice continually bring-

ing to my mind a vague association with the sound of the breathless sea as it lipped about the ragged edges of the rocks beyond the door.

"That one's up to eighty years—ach, and more, I'm thinking. There was an old lad in it this place, I mind, used to be saying she took the sway for comeliness over all the women, and she in the spring-flood of her youth. There used to be little in it, he'ld be saying, between herself and that one on the Clare side had the name on her of An Posadh Glégeal—Mary Hynes they called her—maybe you heard them speak of her through the country—the same the blind poet put into the song the way she found death on the head of it."

He sighed deeply.

"Musha, may be it was well for her. The old women do be saying beauty's a heavier burden than hunger."

He sucked loudly at his pipe and then continued, his sharp features, the tightly-drawn skin looking almost transparent in the firelight, suddenly assuming the fixed and meaningless playfulness of a death's head.

"I was telling you about old Peg. Well,

she was a lively piece, and before she was of age she was married to a lad of this place—one of the Macdonaghs—it was in the old shed where they used to be hearing holy mass before the chapel was built they were married.

"It's like she was a healthy lass enough, and she bore two weans to the fella in the first two years. It was not long after that the praties rotted on the crayters, and the hunger was loosed in every corner of Ireland, and on this place as well as another.

"It was a fright for ever, yon time. They would be chewing the skins they used those days in the place of glass in the windies. They'ld step out of doors of a morning and lean against the wall looking out on the pratie garden, and they'ld stay that way till they got death, and it's quick enough the grey lad would be coming (let the dog be, Mary Kate! Shoo out of that, will you? Arú, let you move back west to your mammy, Brighidín; you'll be burnt so!)."

The pipe absorbed his attention again for a few moments. Then he spat in the heart of the fire and proceeded in accents the

cajoller of timid maidenhood might have envied.

"Well, the lad went before the turn of the year. Sure his four bones be to have been soft some way, the poor fella, and from that out it's hard to say but the hunger put on her more than she was fit to thole, and she a lone widow woman. You may believe by the same token the sight of they two weans going to loss for want of a crust preyed on her till the sense began to fail in her.

"Well, musha, in the rear of it she went light in the head entirely, and what was the thing she did but one night to take the two weans and to leave them out in the tide till they were drownded on her, and quit of the hunger and the sharp weight of life. That was a great sin surely, you'll be saying, and maybe she'll get damnation in the end for that thing yet. That's in the mind of the Man above.

"She never got sense from that out, and her comeliness fell away from her like the blossom from the branch, and 'twas not long indeed till she was left a crawling, snivelling old cailleach, the way she is this time, and she a young woman always. And

gorra, wasn't she curious? From that time she took the notion that them two weans were living always in the sea and the hunger ever on them, the way they'ld be coming up at the full of the tide and they crying out for bread. She'ld be throwing most all she had on the sea them times, till she'ld be near starved herself, till one day the neighbours took the notion to scheme on her that the stones of the strand were pieces of bread and spuds and the like, and she got a kind of solace from that, on the head of there being so many stones always."

"She's a curious lassie right enough," he added, grinning peacefully at the bowl of his pipe.

"The crayter," said the woman of the house with a deep sigh. Somewhere in the shadow of their mother's skirts the children began teasing one another with little gleeful shrieks.

"Quiet there," said the weaver softly, and the small folk were instantly still.

"That was the granddaughter of her brother you be to have seen," he answered in reply to a question of mine. "They thought it a pity on her and took her in

after her thatch fell away. I doubt they're bothered enough with her."

I left soon after, and groped my way homeward under the light of the stars. Glancing over it before I went to bed my poem satisfied me even less than when I started out in the evening.

BEFORE DAWN

I

THE night mail from Wexford was as usual long overdue. In the misty and draughty station waiting-room Martin Brady and I stared dully before us at a poster blazoning forth in colours, mercifully subdued by dust, the advantages of travelling by the Glen Line to Montreal and Quebec, and witnessed the depressing suicides of a whole nation of moths in the sickly and occasionally spitting gas-jet. Meanwhile we sustained our patience with what philosophy our drowsiness could achieve. Such places are at all times perhaps the most desolate of all monuments to the grim severities of our latter-day civilisation, and on this particular night, for reasons that will shortly appear, the scratched and shiny oilcloth on the floor, strewn with dirty scraps of paper and strands of straw and fluff, the streaks of damp visible on the wall immediately behind the pretence of illumination provided by the half-inch of gas flame, and the

desultory flapping of the torn edge of a time-table stirred in the draught from the platform, produced in my own mind at least an impression of ominous gloom. For Martin I cannot speak, as conversation had lapsed long ago, and he was now eking out the delay to the risk of his eyesight with a much-thumbed copy of "Insurrections."

Leaning back and tilting my cap from my brow I watched with smarting and fascinated eyes the pale circle of light, yellowish-red in colour, oscillating slightly upon the charred brown patch upon the ceiling immediately above the gas-bracket. I found myself sleepily trying to discover whether its rhythmical movement had any relation in speed to that of my own pulse, and then suddenly this spectacle proclaimed itself inwardly the most stupid I had ever encountered, and I rose with a blasphemous ejaculation and stamped to the door.

"This is too much," I said savagely, glaring at the irritatingly complacent Martin.

Drifting out to the streaming platform, though my coat collar was buttoned up to my chin I shivered at the sudden contact with the damp chill of the night atmos-

phere. Peering up the long waste of the platform, the leaping of the raindrops on the greasy flags dishearteningly visible in the shaft of dim light escaping from the waiting-room window, I perceived the opaque form of the single night porter, in probably life-long attachment to this unfrequented station. He appeared to be engaged in a melancholy conflict with a refractory lamp. More from the lack of anything else to do than from any definite motive I strolled towards this solitary figure, purposing vaguely to make some inquiry as to the cause of this belation.

A shrewd and clammy wind scuffled up the platform to meet me, but above its petulant and further whining I heard the monotonous roar of many swollen waters loosed in the hills during the day. In an energetic organism enforced idleness stimulates an exaggerated interest in details at other times too trivial to arrest the attention, and as I neared the man I observed him with some curiosity. He made no movement whilst I approached, but continued to fumble deliberately with the rusty tap, holding the grimy glass shutter closed against his thick red wrist

in order to shelter the flame from the wind. He was elderly and enormously fat. His round shoulders bulked like boulders in the flickering and sickly flare which lit somewhat saliently his fatuous and puffy profile, and the corner of a glassy eye fixed in, as it seemed, a refined yet stupid malignance upon the work before him. There was that about the glimpse I obtained of the aforesaid eye and the shaking of his greasy hands which suggested at once that the man was a hard drinker.

"The mail's very late to-night," I observed with forced affability to his humpy back. He made no answer, but withdrawing his hand gingerly from within the frame of the little improved gas-jet closed the shutter carefully and wiped his palms down the legs of his green corduroy trousers. Then he strolled to the edge of the platform and spat upon the permanent way. For a moment he gazed with melancholy into the night, and then turning, stared at the brim of my cap as though for the first time conscious of my presence. Yet even now he did not speak, being apparently of opinion that my remark was unworthy of confirmation.

"Is there any news of it yet?" I said rather sharply, for his manner nettled me, and my mood, as I have intimated, was a nervous one.

He continued to gaze at me, mistrustfully as I fancied. Then he turned slowly, and peering into the darkness down the line, pointed.

"Is the man dumb?" I said to myself with irritation.

Following the indication of his tremulous forefinger after a moment I discerned the signal, an obscure but uncompromisingly rectangular object in the greater obscurity of the night.

He let his arm fall and wallowed round to me.

"Not signalled at Arklow yet!" he piped suddenly in a surprisingly thin voice, and with obvious satisfaction. "Maybe she'll not be in for another hour," he added as a happy afterthought, and there was almost a note of triumph in his tone. Indeed I quite expected him to chuckle. However, whilst I stared at him helplessly he turned abruptly and disappeared into some kind of coal-shed or office on the right.

"Damn the fellow!" I muttered in vexa-

tion, and trudged back to the waiting-room.

The pallid haze surrounding the naked gas-jet dazzled me on entering from the darkness outside, and I felt rather than saw the bright eyes of my companion turned towards me. In a few bitter words I informed him of the situation and referred resentfully to the singular personality of the porter.

Martin laughed.

"From your description," he said, "I can read you lad like a book. I tell you, boy, if that old train came in up to time that fella would be the most miserable man on God's earth. He'ld feel his life was blighted, so he would. It's the sense of personal dignity and superiority that keeps a person's head up, and what better neck-stiffener might you hope for than to cherish a perennial grievance against a whole company for keeping you out of your bed at night. Why, that man would be in his rights to spit at a director if he'ld meet one, and mind you that."

"It's all very fine for you to be funny about it," I said viciously, for the suspense was beginning to fret me severely, "but if that train's late then it means the sea was

too rough for the Fishguard boat, and as for our man—well—maybe the whole kit of us will find ourselves in the father and mother of a mess."

And here it will doubtless be anticipated that we were engaged on an illegal enterprise, and so it was—no other indeed than gun-running. Toward the end of the summer an idea had occurred to me for a *coup* on a rather extensive scale. My scheme was a complicated one, and required nice and tactful manipulation. Its inception and general outlines were as follows.

II

One lovely September afternoon I was loitering on the quay at Arklow, idly watching the fishing fleet preparing to set out for their night's work, and chancing to fall into a desultory political discourse with a master of one of the vessels, I accidentally discovered that two of his sons were ardent members of the local corps of the volunteers. My man, a not very intelligent member of his class, seemed extravagantly proud of his lads, and with the dull pertinacity and garrulity of his kind when possessed with a

fixed idea very soon succeeded in boring me considerably with his reiterations as to the imperative need of arms at the present instant. My attention was beginning to wander towards the evening glitter of the quiet sea and the always fascinating business of the raising of sails in small boats, when I was recalled by a sharp nudge at my elbow.

I turned rather irritably.

The man's wrinkled face was contorted grotesquely with the stress of some absorbing notion.

He jerked a grimy and oily thumb over his shoulder at a pile of cases used for the packing of fish for Dublin markets, and for the present heaped against a wall amid a litter of straw and soiled labels. Approaching his hairy lips within an inch of my face, and goggling his sea-strained eyes in rather a ghastly manner, he observed secretly in a hoarse whisper: "They'ld go fine into those," and nodded at me with solemn emphasis.

I glanced back. They certainly would go fine into those. And then my scheme leapt into being almost instantaneously.

"Are the fish running strong these days?" I asked. He stared at me for a moment as though pained at my irrelevance and levity.

"Ah, well, not too bad at all," he said rather sourly, "just middling. But what I do be saying all times about these lads of volunteers——"

I knew that his perfunctory admission probably signified something in the nature of a record catch.

"I'll be seeing you again to-morrow evening," I said hurriedly. "Good luck now," and I left him staring after me in shocked bewilderment. The details seemed to link together fairly well. I thanked providence with fervour that Paddy Lynch, that dashing and intrepid youth, was at present in France, also for his quality of engaging self-esteem by which he was convinced, I think, that he was a kind of re-embodiment of Wolfe Tone, designing him as it did for the very enterprise that I wished him to undertake. In a melodramatic mood, as it chanced, he and I had established a cipher for purposes of secret communication should the need arise. I went to the nearest post office at once, and under the cover of our esoteric code wired to him, "Buy twenty cases of rifles for the Government of Paraguay on Shannon. Letter following."

Meantime I thought I had gauged my

artless fisherman adequately enough to ensure his complicity in any conspiracy which would further the martial adornment of his boys. He was to be suborned into leaving his fishing ground on a particular night—as to which he was to be notified—with instructions to stand out to sea, until within a short distance north-east of the Arklow lightship. There he was to meet a small tramp steamer containing the rifle cases and chartered in Havre by the ingenious Lynch, who was to arrange that the vessel should be timed to arrive opposite the Irish coast (if possible carrying no lights) at about the hour of the departure of the fishing fleet from Arklow, in order to allow for the chance of our man making an insufficient haul during the earlier part of the night. The cargo was then to be transhipped into the hooker and repacked in boxes exactly similar to those used for the Irish market. The smack was then to proceed about its ordinary business, arriving at the wharf with the other vessels. The catch would then be weighed, packed, and directed to various destinations—always a lengthy and confusing process. During this period of uninteresting turmoil it was to be antici-

pated that the attention of the official custodians of the port would be deflected either to their duties about the scales or to illegitimate slumber, and that it would be comparatively easy stealthily to mingle the gun-cases, if necessary one by one, with the boxes containing the genuine consignment.

Before they were removed from the hooker twelve of the cases were to be labelled "Fresh Fish—Mr Patrick O'Byrne, Fishmonger and Poulterer, Raheen, Co. Wicklow"; and the other eight addressed to "Mr James Cullen, General Storekeeper, Kilmore." These were the names of two enterprising tradesmen and generous supporters of our league in these towns.

In the interval I called a committee meeting, and after explaining my plan arranged with the two merchants mentioned above for the loan of a couple of carts with which to take the load from Inch station. Martin Brady and I were to assume the guise of carters and to meet the night mail carrying the contraband. We insisted upon undertaking this part of the scheme ourselves, as I considered it unwise to include too many hirelings in the enterprise.

III

All through the week preceding the incident I am now relating the weather had been calm, and diligent perusal of the local papers assured us of heavy catches in the Irish Sea. As will be seen, there were many risks inherent in this precarious undertaking, not the least being the caprices of the weather. My anxiety was aroused when on the morning of the appointed day there was every appearance of rain and probably wind. Indeed when about ten o'clock the windows of my room suddenly rattled I would not have ventured a shilling on the chances of success. However, the weather, though gusty and damp, never became really bad, with the result that Martin Brady and I found ourselves in this lamentable place of shelter at two in the morning pricked with the darts of every kind of uncertainty.

We yawned heavily from time to time whilst the boards under us became momently harder and harder. Finally we sank into utter lethargy, and I at least must have fallen into a doze from which I was suddenly awakened by the roar and clatter

of the train entering the station. We both rose immediately, very much awake, with beating hearts and alert to the parts we were impersonating.

We slouched up to the door, our caps pulled down over our eyes, and our greasy borrowed overcoats buttoned up to our mouths, just as the long line of coaches drew up noisily, creating an impression of violent life and excitement after the stagnation of the foregoing hours. No one alighted, but down the platform we saw the door of the goods-van open, and the mail-bag tumbled out on to the flags followed by the emergence of the end of some large box.

"They've come!" exclaimed Martin under his breath. We bustled up with as much haste as we dared to assume, and soon had them out on the platform. They were there, all twenty of them. We clutched the first box eagerly, and lugged it out to the yard where the carts stood. Returning, we found the train already gone, and the station cloaked in its accustomed dejected somnolence. The only sign of life in sight was my singular acquaintance the porter, who was staring down at the array of cases

with empty and cod-like eyes. Martin's own eye glittered.

"Fresh fish," he chuckled. "Begad! we should shove that lad inside one of these and save our souls from the sin of fraud."

I laughed softly, and indeed could have enjoyed an even worse jest an hour by the clock, so light-hearted had I become at the success of my hazardous ruse. But suddenly I was seized with doubt whether carters, kept out of their beds for the purpose of supplying other people with Friday meals, were likely to be sufficiently altruistic to realise any very rich humour in their situation. I endeavoured to silence my irrepressible companion, At our studiously sulky approach the porter started, and gripping the mail-bag lumbered off with it into the office, wheezing stertorously. We shouted at him, coarsely conjuring him to return to our assistance, but wherever he was he paid no heed.

Martin laughed outright.

"That's a shy one!" he said. "God meant him for a hare rather than an official."

"I thought it was a fish just now," I retorted hysterically, gasping with the weight of the box I was carrying. "It's

just as well though, maybe, these things are mighty sweet-smelling for the stuff they're supposed to contain."

"You're right there, boy," assented Martin, "but he'ld not know the difference. That one would——"

"Here, catch hold like a good 'un, and don't talk so much," I interrupted.

At last we had our cargo stowed away in the two carts and were on the point of starting, when Martin said: "Glory be to God! I've left that book in there. I hope the place is not locked up yet."

I clicked my tongue impatiently, and swung myself from my seat.

"Stay there, I'll get it," I called, and dashed through again to the platform.

A glance at the foggy window was sufficient to show me that the waiting-room was still radiant with what the "D.W. and W.R." is pleased to consider illumination. Hurrying in, I found myself confronted with the porter who had evidently just discovered the book, for he held it in his hand gazing at it with a lack of expression which actually amounted to idiocy. Yet even as my eyes fell upon his face I was astounded to behold it turn suddenly a

ghastly white, and his whole gross body begin to tremble violently. He stumbled nearer to the light, his glazed eyes peering greedily at the words on the cover.

"'Insurrections,' by James Stephens," he muttered, his purple and blubber-like lips shaking. Glancing up in the next moment his gaze met mine. Yet in his grotesque agitation he obviously did not realise me for the instant as anything more than some kind of intelligent retort for the reception of an idea that was filling his obscure soul with some incomprehensible terror. He pointed at the little book with a shaking forefinger, the grimy nail rattling on the paper boards.

"Poetry!" he said. "Stephens! Sure I thought he was better employed!"

This remark filled me with such utter astonishment that for a moment I remained speechless, glued to the spot where I stood.

Then my amazement burst forth like a swollen dam.

"What!" I shouted, "did you know him too?" and suddenly I realised that I was grinning with the sense of the all-compelling ludicrousness of the association of ideas his words called forth.

He glared before him with a kind of puzzled resentment.

"Know Stephens?" he mumbled, in a feeble, dazed voice. "Why wouldn't I know that man? Wasn't I——"

He started with a jerk that shook his whole fat frame, and stared so wildly at me that I suspected that he was seized with some kind of fit.

"O my Lord!" he groaned, and, dropping the book to the floor, where it fell with a slight slam, staggered blindly past me and out on to the platform. I remained motionless for a moment, the smile still on my lips.

Then I shook my head.

"Mad as a hatter," I murmured; and picking up the book went out slowly, musing in my mind what possible blind alley in the life of our talented friend could have decoyed him into even remote intimacy with an insane railway porter.

The platform as I had expected was empty, and I rejoined Martin at once.

"Here you are," I said shortly.

"You're long gone," he observed.

"I could not come on it for the moment in the Cimmerian gloom of that place," I

replied, for somehow, though I could not say why, I felt no inclination to refer to the late obscure incident of the waiting-room.

"Are we ready now?" I inquired tartly. "All right, then. Drive ahead."

IV

We crawled off up the hill leading from the station to the Dublin road. It was the hour before dawn and extraordinarily dark, a thin rain spitting feebly out of the obscurity. Chill and enormous drops splashed occasionally upon my hands and face from the heavy branches arching low across the road. Now that we were at last rid of it, the dim gleam yet visible through the unwashed pane of the waiting-room window seemed to me perversely our only point of contact with familiar and friendly ideas. Even as I glanced at it the light was suddenly extinguished. Beyond the focus of the rays cast forward from our head-lamps the shapes of trees and hills loomed immensely against the weighty and densely packed sky, gigantesque and madly-contorted bulks unrelated in any way to their

pleasant day-light semblances. Distance and proportion were annihilated, and they seemed almost ready to topple upon us as we laboured up the steep road.

By this time lack of sleep, the harassed boredom of our durance in the station, and the reaction following the sudden nervous mood of hilarity on discovering that success had attended my scheme created in me, I suppose, a rather over-sensitive condition. In the midst of the profound, and, as I fancied, inimical silence of the night, our enterprise—even the whole of this present agitation concerning our country that sometimes seemed to hold such high promise of renewed youth and strength and beauty—were suddenly bereft of their heroic guise and appeared an infinitely small and even fussy thing. I reasoned with myself, trying to shake off these morbid and perilous fancies, yet as the moments passed I found myself becoming more and more moody. I wondered if the imperturbable Martin were passing through any such uncomfortable experience, but on this point I was not left long in doubt, for as we passed the dim portals of the tourist hotel at the top of the hill to my horror he began whistling "The

Boys of Wexford" with an ear-splitting precision and cheerfulness.

I turned angrily.

"Drop that, you fool," I exclaimed fiercely. "Do you want the peelers on top of us?"

"Arú," he called back unabashed, "what would those lads be doing streeling about this hour of the night? and if they were itself, sure we're only fishmongers."

"Fine fishmongers!" I retorted weakly, and flicked the mare sharply with the reins. "Get on out of that, will you?"

"I say," shouted Martin cheerily, "I'm damn glad I remembered that book. I wouldn't wish to have lost it since Seaumas gave it me himself. I wonder what the strong, silent man back in the station would have thought of it. I'd like to hear his views on literature. Maybe he's a symbolist. A railway signal now—God above! there's a trace gone!"

"For heaven's sake!" I sighed, and dismounted. Martin fumbled with the harness for a few moments. "Tlk! I can't see a stim," he said. "Back your mare a piece, will you, till we get some light on the subject."

I complied and he set to work again,

whilst I stood by, giving him various advice, fuming inwardly meanwhile at the delay and shivering in the raw night air.

Suddenly I became aware of footsteps on the road behind me, a very heavy, uncertain tread labouring toilsomely as it seemed up the ascent. I listened carefully, and noted that the devious approach of this sound was accompanied by a low noise as of muttering, apparently in disapproval of something.

"Hst!" I said sharply; "what's that?"

"What's what?" answered Martin thickly, his teeth clenched in the stress of struggle with an over-short strap.

"That noise behind there."

Martin paused and listened. The muttering was plainly audible now. He laughed a little scornfully.

"Some one on the road, that's all. Gad, you're as nervous as a cat to-night. It's only some tramp was travelling on his two feet since yesterday was a week, lady of the house. The county Wicklow must be stiff with that kind since Synge invented them. Well, táim réidh anois. Come on now."

I was about to resume my seat on the cart, when through the gloom, already faintly

growing towards dawn, the figure of the soliloquist, a gross and swaying bulk, floundered up over the brow of the hill.

"Poetry!" it wheezed gustily. "Damned rhymed nonsense! Stephens! God bless my soul!"

Vaguely I beheld two arms of incredible thickness cast toward heaven, as if in protest against some monstrous enormity. Then the shape wallowed heavily to one side, splashing noisily into the puddle.

"It's that porter again," I exclaimed. "I could see he was the sort that would drink the stars out of the sky."

Even as I spoke the bizarre monster seemed to catch sight of us, hesitated for an instant, and then lunged forward and fell stumbling over his own heels in the mud of the road.

Martin and I gazed at one another in consternation. Then my companion went over to the motionless man, and bending over him shook his shoulders roughly.

"Here, rise up out of that, you," he adjured him, but the only audible response was a dull and rather injured moan.

Martin pushed back his cap and scratched the back of his head.

"Here's a nice thing!" he said; "what'll we do now?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I suppose he lives somewhere on the road. Anyway, we can hardly leave him out here in this rain. We'ld better take him up and drop him some place later on when he's fit to stand, if we don't get out of him where he lives."

"Right," agreed Martin. "You'ld better take him; he's your pal."

I could not forbear to grin ruefully, and together with much difficulty we hoisted my apparently unconscious enigma on to my cart, where among the wooden cases pregnant with nails and splinters he sprawled upon as uncomfortable a bed as could well be imagined.

We jogged on again to the accompaniment of an abominable rattling, whilst the pallor of the weeping dawn spread slowly over the sky. Now and again I glanced over my shoulder at my precious charge. He still lolled languorously among the gun-cases, his soiled trousers strained across his colossal legs, and his dangling boots clattering against the boards of the cart outside. His massive trunk looked like some immense

bale of packing material, whilst his upturned face, white and flabby, rolled from side to side, and in the uncertain light seemed to my sleep-intoxicated vision to shake like a jelly-fish.

Another quarter of an hour passed by, each minute the morning noticeably lightening, and then above the shattering row of the cart's progress I heard a sound of creaking behind me. Quickly turning half round I was astonished to behold my unwelcome passenger sitting up stiffly among the boxes, his blotchy countenance close to mine. More repellantly surprising than this mere proximity, however, was the expression of his puffy eyes, which to my amazed disgust betrayed something that I can only suggest by the word sly.

A sudden uneasiness seized me at the sight of this apparition.

"Where do you live?" I said severely. "Anywhere near here?"

He did not answer, but continued to smile loathsomely.

I began to lose control of my nerve, and consequently of my never very reliable temper.

"Listen here now," I said sharply. "Are

you sober enough to understand what I'm saying? Because I'm willing and anxious to put you down at your own place at the first possible moment."

Still there was no response. I felt my face turn pale, and I began to tremble a little.

"Will you answer me?" I said slowly and distinctly, though my voice shook with suppressed rage. "For I don't mind telling you that I'm not taking a drunken carcass like you through the country for a joy-ride."

I stared at his immovable figure, and then all at once my nervous fury broke out.

"Don't grin at me like that," I yelled down at him. "Only for me you'ld be getting your death in the ditch of the road. Here, now, where do you live? Speak up, and be quick about it!"

To this outburst the creature stirred heavily and answered with a drunken leer of inexpressible cunning. Then he wagged one thick finger at me, and chuckled thinly.

"You want to know too much, young fella," he piped. slowly and mellifluously. "It's too wise you'ld be altogether."

I pulled up the mare with a vicious jerk and leapt to the road, tremulous with anger.

"Hullo!" said Martin lazily, halting also; "from what I hear from time to time you don't seem to be hitting it off with our fair friend. Some literary squabble, I take it, eh?"

I explained the situation. Martin whistled.

"Oh, that's the way, is it?" he said, and alighting from his seat went up to my antagonist and addressed him quietly and firmly.

"Now, my buck, where do you live? If you don't like to answer me, you know, just continue to smile in your winsome way, and we shall fire you out into the road."

The man's face slowly assumed an expression of intense lugubriousness.

"I'ld die surely," he said weakly. "I'm not fit to stand, I'm that drunk."

He buried his face in his hands and began to weep noisily, the tears trickling between his dirty and lumpy fingers.

"The wide world is against me," he blubbered dolorously, and smeared the back of his hand across his mouth and nose.

"I'm not surprised," I shouted. "It's a great pity——"

"Sh!" said Martin, "let him tear away. What will we do with him? Maybe he

really can't stand. He does not look much like it. What do you think?"

"Oh, for God's sake, let us get on now," I exclaimed wretchedly. "This is like an infernal nightmare. We can leave this brute in some byre as soon as we find any open door."

On we went again through the slate-coloured dusk. The wind blew freshly now, and the rain fell fast, a clearing-up shower in all likelihood, for a quickening spring of renewed vitality seemed at work in the heart of the coming day. In the east the clouds were breaking somewhat, and the rosy glow was beginning to lighten the cold grey above the hills on the horizon line. Far away cocks were crowing, and some small birds piped softly overhead. I have no doubt that this particular dawn was no less beautiful than other September mornings, but I was too weary, both physically and mentally, to view it other than wholly objectively.

Ten minutes passed, and then I was aware of a very small and meek voice behind me.

"Mister," it whispered hoarsely, and with exaggerated humility. I rounded on him petulantly.

"Well, what is it?" I said brutally. "No more of your nonsense now!"

I looked at him keenly.

The whole attitude of his abundant person was subservient, almost cringing indeed, and yet it seemed to me that his eyes, buried in their pallid rings of fat, were more guilefully alert than I had hitherto seen them. For a moment, too, I thought I noticed his mouth twitch as though about to lapse into its detestable smile, but immediately his newly acquired doleful servility reasserted itself. He pointed mournfully to a small cottage a few yards further down the road on the left. It was slate-roofed, and looked very shabby.

"Well?" I queried unsympathetically.

"That's my house, mister," he uttered in a stifled and chastened tone. "It's a poor enough place," and he smudged a tear down the side of his nose.

"Well, thank God, that's a mercy," I said, and drew up before the cottage door.

"Come on now, down you get!"

He gazed at me with gentle melancholy, and indeed almost reproachfully, and shook his head with an indulgent smile.

"I couldn't do it," he murmured, almost as though shocked at my callous suggestion,

and spreading out his palms deprecatingly, seemed to wallow in bestial ease upon his unenviable couch. I was about to respond with some useless profanity when Martin, who had also alighted, interposed.

"So this is the point when Silenus returns to his woodland haunt. Oime! Oime!" he pretended to wail.

"Look at him, and try not to be an ass!" I said bitterly.

Martin smiled whimsically.

"H'm," he sighed, "I suppose there's only one thing to be done. Open that door."

V

I lifted the latch of the cottage door, and flinging it wide returned to the cart.

"Take a deep breath," said Martin. "Ready? Now then!"

Together we bundled the friend of the unaccountable Stephens out of the place of his repose, and staggering bore him to his own door. He sagged in our arms like a sack of flour, a dead weight of venerable iniquity. "Go on, right in," commanded Martin grimly; "we'll have him on our hands for evermore else."

With some difficulty we shoved and hauled him through the door. The interior of the cottage was noticeably mean and dirty, and instantly bore witness to the patent fact that our burden was its only inmate. There appeared to be no furniture in the room designed to sustain the weight beneath which we laboured, so we dropped him none too carefully on his back upon the flags of the floor. He appeared at his ease immediately, sighing with content and simpering up at us benignantly, his eyes half-closed. He looked revolting. Clasping his podgy hands over his stomach he addressed us in warbling accents—

"I am sure I'm humbly grateful to yez both. It's a great wonder, so it is, two young gentlemen the like of you ones to be so kind to an old lone man."

We started and stared at one another disconcerted, and then it struck me that, relying on his condition, I had scarcely been mindful of the manner and dialect fitting to the character I was supposed to be playing. Martin was obviously decidedly alarmed.

"We're not toffs, damn it," I said angrily, but rather irresolutely, "nor anything like

it. Only that you're blind to the world you'd see well enough we're two country boys carrying fish for the Friday market."

I glared down at him in embarrassment. The huge form prone on the floor began to shake convulsively, and then emitted a succession of shrill chuckles.

"Fish!" he piped, giggling wheezily, "fish! That's no a bad one! You're the boys will have your fun! But I'm a man of education too, I tell you, that's what I am. Only that I am a bit boozed I'd show you well enough I'm a learned speechifier. You don't come it over me—oh, no, you don't! Stephens himself couldn't come it over Johnny O'Toole. He was a smart lad—but he wasn't fit to bet me. Hee-hee! 'fish,' he says; 'tis a good one, surely."

"God save us, Michael," exclaimed Martin uneasily under his breath.

"Come on out of this. What's that he said about Stephens? That man's raving mad." He plucked at my arm anxiously.

"All right! come away," I said, but still I did not move, powerless to break the spell of mingled disgust and fascination that this man wrought over me in the moment.

"O'Toole's my name," soliloquised the

monster sleepily. "Nobody will come it over me. My great-grand-da was the King of Leinster—God Almighty, what is this I'm after saying? I'm horrid drunk, I'm thinking—'twas likely before his time, the old liar—ay, but he was a great fella, too, that Stephens. I'd have cleaned his two boots for him one time, surely, so I would. But in the rear of it he got too big for those same boots." He sighed noisily. "So me lad had to go, and that's where I came in." He yawned with obscene luxury. After a moment he opened upon me an eye astoundingly crafty for one in his seeming condition.

"Have you got that book about you, young fella?" he inquired.

I felt Martin fidgeting at my side.

"Come on, Michael," he said, quite impatiently for him. "Surely we've had enough of this old buckallero. What's all this maundering about Jimmy Stephens, anyway? I don't understand it."

"Hsh!" I whispered, "he saw your 'Insurrections,' but it's not that Stephens he's drivelling about, I believe."

"What?" exclaimed Martin, startled utterly out of his usual self-possession.

"Ah, well, don't mind it," said the remarkable porter with condescension, and his head sank back again flabbily. "It gave me a turn though—a mighty bad turn. Poetry too. Bah!"

He was silent for a moment. Then he unclasped one hand and waved it lazily in our direction, keeping the other still resting on his stomach. "Don't be minding me," he said with majestic affability. "I'll do well enough. You get along to Dublin, my little sojer-boys. It's a middling good load you have nabbed out there, but let you be minding 'em well. There's information boys about these times, I'll warrant. They're the sly ones too, mind you. I'm the boy knows all about that."

He heaved himself up suddenly on one elbow and peered with surprising keenness at Martin.

"Hullo!" he chirped solicitously. "What's the matter with yon fella? You look queer, my little sugar-hero, mighty queer, so you do."

Martin was certainly very pale, and I apprehended that his much-enduring nerve had at last given way under the stress of a sudden moral revulsion in the presence

of this atrocious creature, whose personality had all at once acquired for my frank-minded friend a new and sinister significance—a revulsion that in my less ingenuous mind had been gradually accumulating all through the night.

I took an impetuous step forward.

"It's my belief you're a damned informer yourself," I blurted out with ineffective aggression.

He shifted his eyes languidly to me, frowning slightly like a neuralgic invalid disturbed by a sudden noise, and blinked expressionlessly at my furious face. I longed to remove my gaze, so hateful was the appearance of that prone and flaccid shape. He looked moribund, suggesting to my shocked fancy some bloated and semi-decayed fish. Then he smiled complacently and folded his hands again in their former position.

"He's all right," he said, jerking his head scarcely noticeably towards Martin, "a decent poor lad. He wouldn't harm a flea, I doubt. But you, young gentleman—you listen here. Don't you be getting too fly. Take care you don't wear out your boots one of these days." He winked at me with

sinister familiarity, and then for an instant a flash of scorn lit his commonly sleepy eyes.

"Ah, now, you needn't be frightened before me. I'll not blab on your like, ye little prancing schoolboys. Ye've a great notion of yourselves entirely, so you have, but you're not game for me—O'Toole that sent James Stephens to Mountjoy, and he the best man came out of Ireland for a hundred or more years. And what did I get out of it, hey? 'You've done a great service to the Empire,' says the fella up in the room in the bloody Castle, and him speaking as though it was some kind of a lesson he had learnt out of a book. 'You'll be suitably recompensed. Call to-morrow and you'll get the hundred pounds reward. And now clear out,' he says, going on with the writing he was at and looking in any place but towards myself. I tell you I stared at him till my eyes were as big as footballs. There was a bald spot on the top of his head the size of an egg. It shone like a plate, I mind, and it was tip-and-tig that I didn't spit in the middle of that same spot, I was that mad raging."

I could conceive nothing less adapted to

a transport of violent fury than that enormous and recumbent bulk, looking as though no known force could ever stir it again. He continued in purring tones—

"Well, I found myself out of that somehow, and for an hour or more I was streeling up and down Thomas Street, in and out of the gutter, and cracking up against this and that, and all the time the word was dinning in my head that I'ld rot before I'ld touch a one of those dirty Government notes. Still an' all the next day there was myself in that room again, and the same little snivelling cur pitched me over the ten ten-pound notes, as he might be feeding pigs.

"'And now you can get on out of this,' he says. 'I think we can manage to dispense with your services from this out,' he says. 'I think so, don't you, Mr O'Toole?' he says, rubbing his two skinny little hands together. Well, I did get out of that, and mighty quick too, you may believe me, or I'ld have torn the two big lugs off him. They looked as though they had been glued on badly and had come partly unstuck. That same evening I posted off them notes to the Fenian fund from an anonymous subscriber." He made an indistinct noise, and at his next

word it was clear that his sentimental mood was upon him again.

"Ah, now, he was a great fella, that Stephens. Your Parnells and all your blatherskiting Parliament crew weren't fit to walk down the same street after him. Jimmy! Jimmy!" he spluttered with seemingly unfeigned feeling, and burst into sobs, his contours rolling under the sway of this unexpected fit of emotion.

"My God! O my God!" he moaned. I heard Martin fumbling uncertainly with the latch of the door. The soft clatter shattered suddenly the spell of fascinated attention that had mastered me, and with a sensation as though some noxious substance had been emptied over my head I realised for the first time the true nature of that man's complacently boastful and altogether abominable confession. I felt a little sick, coupled with an overwhelming urgency to be out of that room, and was edging towards the door which the nerveless Martin seemed incapable of opening when I heard at my side a squealing so harsh and spiteful that my heart leapt to my mouth.

"Get on out of that, ye mean little hole-and-corner patriots!" the voice of the in-

former vociferated. "I've done with ye now. I've shown ye who's on top, hey? Ye'll not forget O'Toole, I'm thinking, that ye carried home like a bloody king! I'll not be come over by any man, I tell you. No man high or low will wipe his boots on O'Toole. Get out of this, I'm saying!"

I felt physically stifled, and jerking open the door shoved Martin before me and stumbled after him, treading on his heels. Inside the house the high-pitched raucous voice still continued its venomous and triumphant tirade, mingled with the sound of hysterical sobbing, an atrocious and shocking din such as might proceed from behind the doors of a slaughter-house.

February 1914.

"FROM THE FURY OF THE O'FLAHERTYS!"

I

THE light toward which Forgael Joyce was groping appeared to remain quite moveless as to distance—neither to approach nor to recede. There were times, however, when it leapt up and down, spinning it seemed a great height into the air and then falling back in a zig-zig like some demoniac star. In marking these fantasies of his goal Forgael was careful not to forget that he had received a heavy blow on the side of the head during that affair on the hill; indeed he constantly strove to keep every incident of the night very clearly ranged before his mind, having discovered that even momentary lapses of memory were accompanied by spasms of dizziness and nausea which caused him to suppose that the rocks were turned to sliding and heaving slime beneath his naked feet. He also feared sleep, until at least he could stretch out his sore limbs before the hearth of his

clan that sickeningly lured him through the howling darkness. The wind was enormous. The whole sky was full of it. It ravaged wolf-like among the flying flocks of black cloud. It hammered and screamed against the folded gates of heaven itself. At one moment it whined in some remote place over the ridge of the world, and in the next it was upon him, buffeting his weary body like the fist of a giant. It seemed to invade his every faculty, to reverberate thunderously in hollow places of his brain. He marvelled vaguely at this, wondering if his skull indeed gaped since he had fallen beneath the cudgel of that dirty squinting bradach at the end of the long fight.

"Ugh!" he muttered aloud, and shook himself savagely. Such fancies were dangerous. He struggled forwards for a few minutes with determination, twice slipping heavily in holes among the rocks. Again something seemed to snap in his head. The yellow star swam up very high and tumbled giddily, skipping like a marsh light before it settled again in its place. He pushed out one hand and steadied himself against a boulder, passing the other across his brow.

His personality was scattered somewhere in that roaring chaos. With an immense effort he tried to remember his name, and the reason for his presence on just this night on this particular mountain side. His brain seemed emptied out, void of everything except the clamour and shock of the storm. At last, with horrible pain, he dragged reason up from the abyss.

"Forgael Joyce," he said to himself, and repeated the words several times, clinging to the syllables of his own name as a dying man clings to life. Then, with sudden, sobbing laughter in his soul, he remembered the wide stark eyes of the man who had rushed into his house two days before with the tidings that Forgael's son had been hanged by the O'Flaherty in some corner of hills on the borders of Iar-Connaught. Afterwards he recalled dreamily like an old tale his reckless dash over those fifteen mountain leagues, leaving the wind of March lagging at his heels, and hailing out any that would follow and who possessed horses among the sons and fosterlings of the clan. And then came the calamitous splendour of the preceding evening, when

their little band, spent with its hard travel yet scourged with the whip of an inherited fury, dashed headlong upon a marauding troop of the O'Flaherty in a high gap of the Maam mountains. They were outnumbered by three to two. Aree! There was very mighty work up there on the hillside with the bald eagles screaming hoarsely above them, like the Bodh and Morigu of the old times. They had trampled hard into soft, they had changed the courses of many an eas and sruthán. Blood had poured down into the heather, red and rich as Spanish wine. At the end of an hour the ravens began to screech against the wind overhead, and to move closer and closer to the earth between the darkening rock walls of the gap. A shape writhed prone in a bog-hole, a groan was snatched away in the whimper of the rising storm, a stiff arm swung once towards the dying flare in the west, and the mountain calm fell again on the place.

"It was a great fight, surely," said Forgael aloud, the corners of his mouth stiffened in the wind. Then the sickness came on him again.

II

The house was overhung by a cluster of ragged sycamore trees tormented by the storm and twisted eastward. The loose weed-grown thatch hissed and seethed under the lashings of the lower branches. The eaves and the noisy leafy confusion above them seemed to the wanderer's brain to tower above his head like a dwelling-place of the giants that stalked through the folk-tales of the time. He staggered squelching through the waste of liquid manure before the door. Strands of straw blown from the thatch clung clammily about his ankles. Raising one fist he aimed a careful blow at the upper board of the half-door, which in some strange way seemed of immense size, and to lean forwards towards him threateningly. A raven flew screeching out of the straining branches above him, and as the sound scraped his brain his body came into contact with the door with a dull, bruising thud. "Tar isteach," cried a voice within the house, and Forgael tried to stand upright, but his shoulders seemed heavy as lead, and he lurched back half-recumbent against the board. From within, he heard

an impatient exclamation and a low growl, seemingly uttered by many voices. Some one strode across the floor, clattering, and fumbled with some heavy object which was keeping the door closed. Forgael with a great effort jerked himself upright, and stood swaying in the wind, his fevered eyes glaring at the door a few inches before them, with the penetrating fixity of one scanning immense distances. The two boards swung open instantaneously with a great rattling, and the wanderer stumbled forward, dazed by the light of the fire within the house.

"Go mbeanninghidh Dia dibh uilig!" he muttered indistinctly, groping forward in the glare like a blind man.

"Dia's Muire dhuit fein, a dhuine chóir," growled a few voices in answer.

The fire was lighted in the middle of the floor of the house, the smoke rising in a blue column to the roof, where it escaped through a hole in the thatch. From this central column, however, dense wreaths were continually blown back by the draught, spreading out in soft folds among the rafters, and dispersing suffocatingly into every corner of the place.

Around the fire and phantasmal in the slowly moving smoke-drifts a throng of wild-faced men sprawled, their hair and beards—dark in colour for the most part—tangled and unkempt. Many of them were so ragged as to appear almost naked, the better clad among their number being covered as to the upper part of the body with tattered and incredibly filthy cloaks, patched together from diverse-coloured rags. Below these they wore the "trews." Most of the faces were scarred horribly with the tracks of old wounds, and ploughed by the smallpox. Many of these injuries seemed quite recent. One man mopped with his sleeve an open gash extending from ear to chin, another pinched together the wrinkles of a seared brow between a bloody finger and thumb. In a dark corner three dead men lay together in a confused heap.

There was no furniture in the room, a pile of dirty straw in one corner marking the resting-places of the household. The fierce core of fire in the heart of the peats alone illuminated the room, though somewhat in the shadow a half-naked young woman was peeling rushes for lights. As each one was prepared she dipped it in a pot of liquid

swine's fat. An ass stood motionless in a patch of dark shadow behind the fire, and several pigs snuffed and grunted among the dishevelled limbs of the company. One or two completely naked children rolled quarrelling sleepily in the filth of the floor.

"Let you sit down, stranger, whoever in Ireland you may be, since your words of mercy show you to be one of our race," said the man of the house. It was he that had opened the door.

"I took a start before him and he coming in," said a voice from the smoke in a hoarse whisper. "A person would think that one was from the ridge of the pucks or the faery mounds—God between us and themselves!"

All blessed themselves with a faint rustling sound.

Forgael fell to the floor near the hearth, his head dropping heavily on his outstretched arms.

For a moment there was silence, in the hot light all eyes glaring from beneath tufted eyebrows upon the unconscious visitor. Then the man of the house grunted, and, drawing a skin pouch containing usquebaugh

from beneath the rags on his chest, forced the orifice roughly between the stranger's teeth.

After a moment the man groaned, faintly mumbled something in his beard, and rolled film-hung, half-opened eyes.

"Prop him up some way, lord," said a harsh voice.

"Who is he, would you be saying?" queried another, spitting on the floor between his squatting legs.

"Arú, he asking the devil the names of his own brood! Some streeler out of Erris maybe with the belly on him rumbling with emptiness and his throat cracking with songs. The country does be rotten with that kind."

Meanwhile, with a gasping curse the man of the house had heaved up the half-awakened Forgael, setting him so brutally against the wall that his head came into sharp contact with the hard mud behind it.

There was a rough roar of laughter over which a short shrill yelp from the rush-girl rang like a gull's cry over the hoarse surge of the tide.

"That'll waken him, sure," chuckled one.

But the exhausted man only opened blank

eyes for a moment, snorted heavily, and then drooped back again, his chin thrust out in the glare of the fire, and the rest of his face in shadow.

"Devil a wake," spluttered a horribly battered mouth in the foreground. "God, that one has the skull of the Gobán Saor itself!"

There was more laughter at this.

"Let you ring your bell again, Fedlimidh, our lord," boomed the harsh voice that had spoken before, "till we see the devils fly from it."

"Arú, do not then. Maybe it's a poet he is with the soaring flame of curses hissing in his learned heart."

Slowly approaching, Fedlimidh bent over the sleeper and shook him heavily to and fro, yet not without a certain superstitious awe.

"Rouse up now, just man. Rouse up out of that, I'm saying, and Brighid of the Mantle between your soul and harm and the souls of all here!"

Sighing heavily, Forgael yawned, stretched himself and sat up, gazing before him with vague, feverish eyes.

Fedlimidh stared down at him in per-

plexity for a few moments, scratched in the tangle of his chin, and then said—

"There are some here are leaving, maybe it's a man of songs you are, stranger?"

Forgael slowly turned his giddy eyes on the speaker—

"I am not then," he murmured dully after a moment's pause.

The other made a restless movement.

"Do you say so, stranger?" he said. "It's not a man of my clan would be giving the lie to a guest, but I would take surety by sun and moon there's many a coloured rag of sweet music does be choking your throat this moment!"

"Devil a song ever I sung but the one song only," returned Forgael sullenly.

"What song was that, stranger?"

"The song of the sword."

"It's a good song all times, surely."

There was a rough growl of assent from the company, followed by a constrained pause.

"What name might be on you, just man?" said the man of the house, breaking a long silence.

The dazed wanderer strove hard. The knot seemed to be twisted again into his

brain, making him feel very sick. Then with a snap his mind cleared once more.

"Forgael," he stammered.

Suddenly the room had become very still. There was no sound but the buffeting of the wind and the heavy scraping of the boughs against the thatch overhead, now and again followed by a soft thudding noise.

Through the smoke hot eyes narrowed at one another.

"It's a dirty name," said the man of the house. "A black name. It smells of the north, stranger. There are no Forgaels in this country. It is out of the north yourself comes, stranger?"

A deep muttering arose about the fire, but Fedlimidh lifted a hand commanding silence. All that was taking place was becoming very dim to the clouded brain of the wounded man. He made a petulant gesture as though tormented by flies.

"How can I be minding that, man of the house? It was a lost corner of foggy hills, and the rain and wind speaking ever." His voice was very drowsy. "But sure," he added thickly, "it's well enough yourself knows my place. Why will you be preying on me, my son?"

Fedlimidh drew himself up haughtily.

"The sense is astray on you surely, I'm thinking, fellow. It's little call you have to be speaking out stiff as an earl, and you a naked streeler does be halting along the back-ways of the world with your four bones rattling in the wind. Listen, now! Let you be minding well myself is lord in this place—I, Fedlimidh, Chief of the clan O'Flaherty!"

Forgael, suddenly aroused, gasped and lifted his head, staring with dull, glazed eyes like those of a drunken man. Then half rising from the floor, his lean face pinched with dread, he shouted hoarsely—

"What thing are you after saying? O'Flaherty! O'Flaherty!" Kneeling shakily on one knee he beat the sides of his head with his two fists. "Is this place hell?" he moaned. "Are you the host of the dead?"

Every one started, and with a furtive glance at the huddled heap in the shadows each man crossed himself swiftly, muttering a rann beneath his breath.

"Have sense, man," cried Fedlimidh angrily. "You be to be light in the head surely!"

Forgael collapsed again on the floor, his limbs trembling.

"Ay, it be to be my head's gone light on me surely," he repeated feebly. "Look at here now!" He bent his head so that the firelight fell on the crown, revealing the long wound in his skull.

"The wind has my five wits picked out through that!" He laughed wildly. "O Dhia, I thought they were loosed on me out of the bloody ridges." Suddenly his eyes blazed and he gesticulated fiercely—

"Musha, it was the sore work, hey, up yonder in the fog—work for the champions of the Gael—the lions of combat. They fought well, the pigs—it's not I will be denying that. Ha! ha! arée! The ravens and eagles do be picking their choice thing of them this moment, and the wind whipping their souls to hell!"

"Hey, friends of my soul! little calves of my love within! Let you tell me now. Is the son of my loins easy this hour in the narrow house of earth? Or is the bright blood of him crying still, maybe? Is his white shapely body swinging yet toward the north and the house of his father, and the starved, hackit lips of his

red mouth singing always of vengeance?" He started up, struggling to his feet, and swayed to and fro, panting heavily, the veins in neck and temples knotted and the sweat pouring from his hair.

"Children," he gasped, "there is great doubt on me this rout was not red enough. Speak, why are you silent? Come with me, grandsons and fosterlings of the Joyces. Let us sweep like a scourge every hill and glen in Iar-Connaught. Let us strip naked the copses and woods. Let us drive every man, woman, and soft child of the seven times cursed clan O'Flaherty over the steep brae of hell where the eternal fires leap and spout hungering for their souls. Come! Come!"

An extraordinary hush followed. Forgael, the hardly achieved breath rasping in his gullet, searched the faces before him with hot protruding eyes. He waited while the wind hurtled against the house and the strange dull thudding above on the thatch became more frequent. No answer came.

"Musha! what has come on you? Why will you not be speaking?" Forgael almost whimpered in a high, stifled scream.

Still there was no reply, but the girl who

had stopped her rush-plaiting laughed softly, hugging her naked breasts in both hands and screwing her long bright eyes maliciously.

Over the tense silence the storm roared and scuffled harder than ever. The scraping and shuffling on the roof was like the sound of waves crashing on loose shingle. Then all at once came a creaking, splitting noise, and something thumped heavily overhead. At the same moment a dense cloud of smoke was driven downwards from the aperture in the roof. The men immediately about the fire leapt to their feet. A raven flew screeching out of the smoke.

"The Lord save us! Is it down he's coming?" cried a panic-stricken voice.

"Open the door! Open the door till we see!" shouted another.

Some one rushed to the door and tore aside the weight which kept it closed.

The boards swung open with a crash and the smoke eddied and circled before the tumultuous inrush of the wind. A shower of sparks was flung backwards from the roaring fire beaten down by the draught. Every face peered upwards, ransacking the rafters. Forgael followed the direction of

their gaze almost unconsciously, the scene swimming round him in a dizzy confusion of flame and pale, furious faces.

Then he shuddered, his eyes squinting, and rushed forward, recklessly treading red-hot sods of turf beneath his bare feet.

High up in the rafters immediately above the fire dangled the naked legs of a man clearly dead for some days, for there were dark patches on the grey flesh, betokening the feast of the birds. The body was caught fast in the smoke hole.

"Hey, you!" a voice roared, "will you come down to the flag of hell?"

There was a roar of savage laughter that clattered in Forgael's rocking brain.

"What is that thing up yonder? Where am I?" he stammered, his teeth rattling.

"On the wrong side of the mountain, Forgael Joyce," answered a booming voice, and in an instant the stranger's body fell pierced by a dozen sgians.

A COWARD'S SAGA

I

"*To the most worshipful and valiant knight, Sir Thomas Carew, defender and governor under Almighty God of Her Most Excellent Majesty's Kingdom of Ireland in the province of Munster.*

"MOST HONOURED SIR,

"Your servant the undersigned being now engaged in the assault of the town of Tralee and the subjugation of Her Gracious Majesty's foul enemies therein quartered doth discriminately indite the despatches here contained, to the effect that your Excellency's servant doth venture to hope and apprehend that the aforesaid undertaking shall very speedily be brought to a joyous and successful issue. Your Excellency's servant had been to great moil and ado to ascertain that privy ingress within the city wall of which he hath been apprised by your Excellency aforetime. But now by the will of God a fortunate chance hath bestowed into my cognisance (as being in

haste your Excellency will permit the more direct manner of address) a certain knowledge, I dare affirm, by means of which the mere Irish shall be dispossessed of the city or ever the sun climb to the height of noon on the morrow.

"Last evening, taking cover of a dense scud of rain trailing very dismally upon the ground (as doth only hap, I swear, in this thrice accursed country), the enemy, those most hateful rebels, did venture upon a desperate excursion upon us from the east gate of the town, Her Majesty's army being distrained (as I have heretofore apprised your Excellency) about the village of Ballyseedy and the surrounding plain. Howbeit as your Excellency hath often and very pertinently observed the very elements deign not to countenance the lecherous designs of such filthy and naked wastrels, and the heavens mercifully lightening of a sudden, their whole force—a not considerable number—was incontinently discovered by the sun's rays, making forward over the boggy land toward us without cover of any kind. As to this exploit, none save witless savages or very desperate pick-pouches as the rebels do ever show themselves, would conceive

so reckless and impudent an enterprise, nor evince as little of dismay on finding themselves in such dire and rueful case. For instead of at once showing their heels to our line they did make straight forward altogether unabashed. Whereupon our arquebusiers drawing into rank with most commendable promptitude and despatch did discharge a volley into their centre or ever they could achieve to come within a distance negotiable to their rude armament. For these contentious wolves and horrid despoilers, being altogether destitute for the most part of any accoutrement proper to polite warfare, were in common with the generality of their nation arrayed only in lousy rags, and armed with nought save the vulgar implements of husbandry as picks, reaping-hooks, scythes, and the like, insomuch that one must indeed marvel at their fiend-begotten fortitude in adventuring at all against a regular fighting force.

"Howsoever, albeit mightily thinned by our fusillade, the remnant did indeed succeed in coming to grips with us for a space, and in compassing some show of resistance. Yet out of that coil did result an incontinent

rout of those saucy vermin, their order being utterly disrupted, so that in the last resort they were perforce constrained to flee with their bare lives for the walls of the town, which many succeeded in accomplishing, they being naked of foot and suppler in the nether limbs on the boggy soil than our men, the which is not to be admired at. Natheless some four prisoners we took which upon being brought to my presence one of them appearing the most well beseeming and personable of their number (and taken earlier than the rest), I did engage to examine first as to that secret passage into the castle which your Excellency wots of (albeit with no exactitude or certainty). On examination of this wight, he proved a very stubborn and forward knave (though pigeon-livered to outward seeming), and would answer nought to my persuasions and threats, yet all times a-choke in the gullet and patently all a-trembling with craven fear. Subsequently tried *other means* to extort the advices of which I was in need, but with no avail. The other rogues being of less mettlesome temper did readily yield to my injunctions, and rendered full and nice particulars in detail and exactitude

engaging to lead us within the walls at dawn, the ward being least vigilant at that hour.

"Little as I am willing to plain over any matter soever whilst in the discharge of Her Most Gracious Majesty's offices in any quarter of the globe, be it Munster, Cathay, or Crim-Tartary, I do affirm that I am most grievously distempered in the body by the stinking foods we are constrained to consume, and moreover that the rheums and malignant vapours of this barbarous clime invade my inmost marrows until I am fain to conceive that the rack or dismemberment itself were no more exquisite an agony. Also it seemeth me well-nigh impossible in such a land and continuously exposed to the rigours of the field to achieve any degree of gallantry, gracious port, or seemliness of habiliment such as is commendable to men nourished in Her Majesty's Court, nor indeed even as much as to compass the body's cleanliness. My mind is presently the more readily exercised upon these matters inasmuch as report prattles of the daughters of certain merchants within the town, wenches of very comely parts, as indeed I have aforetime noted amongst the wild Irish

and the English Irish of Desmond and the Decies, but more particularly the former. Wherefore I do trust that your Excellency will pardon my temerity in requesting some substance (or the receipt thereof) for the better ordering and conservance of the hair and beard, to be delivered with your Excellency's next despatch, and failing that at your nearest convenience, mine own being tangled and matted like unto hay tossed on a fork, and not to be ravelled out save only by tearing out of the very roots.

"I remember that when I was in Youghal I did hear Sir Walter speak of a certain grease distilled from the livers of badgers for the schooling of these hairy appendages of the which at first the savour was somewhat noxious, but did nevertheless attenuate greatly on exposure to the air. However, on attempting this preparation the stink was so villainous that I was fain to retch sorely for some few minutes, upon which I did command the stuff to be cast out on the bog, swearing inwardly diligently to eschew such messes in the future.

"I must conceive that Sir Walter was misinformed in this matter, saving only that he was minded to play off

some whimsy upon my person, though it mislikes me to suspect a gallant warrior and courtier given to such malapert gutter-wantoning. . . .

". . . I am vastly cheered in the mind during our wearisome ensconcement before this dunghill and vile cock-pit of a town, by the perusal of the sonnets of our mutual and most learned friend Edmund Spencer. Here is smoothness! Here the down and bloom of courtesy and chaste verbiage! A mind clipped and trimmed in the last delicacy of our erudite and conceited age! A luting befitting an assemblage of queens! In humble emulation thereof, and further to cheat the tardy heels of time, though the foul climate and intercourse of this damned country is but little inducive to the framing of polite conceits and amorous tropes and aphorisms, yet have I adventured of my own mother wit the inditing of an ode and several madrigals after the new manner unto glorious Oriana. Certain among them achieve a certain polish I dare boast, and on my return to London (and I pray God's mercy for the speedy fulfilment of that event) I shall set about to solicit the good offices of some composer of music. I have

heard a Mr William Byrde bespoken as a very sweet and deft melodist. . . ."

Much more there was, but there we have the pith and something beyond it of the meticulous commandant's letter. Finally he added his superscription, "Sir Edward Denny, Knt.," an involved piece of caligraphy graced by as many curls and convolutions as were to be found in Sir Thomas's beard after its court dressing.

Appended to this graceful document was a wafer sealed with Sir Edward's crest.

Later, Sir Thomas reading it, his brows furrowed to the deciphering of the cramped script and aqueous ink, fondled his famous beard in a meditative fist.

Very attentive to the earlier part, he nodded in dispassionate approval on reaching the phrase "*used other means*," smiled at the naïve entreaty for pomatum, and laughed outright at the badger's liver receipt, knowing the gallant adventurer at Youghal better than most, and being fully cognisant of that comprehensive historian's fondness for humour on broad lines. Lastly, a receding lip curled contemptuously at the passage referring to the writer's emula-

tion of the author of "Epithalamium" and "Amoretti." Sir Thomas held a tempered opinion of his correspondent's literary gift. In point of fact, that gentleman's verse was fully as well turned as his leg, and his conceits rather more than tolerable, but the age was a hypercritical one in the refinements of the sonneteer's art, and the governor's tastes were sternly eclectic in such matters.

II

"Be doing everything I tell you this time," said the little red dog.

"I will so," said the King of Ireland's son, said he. They were going and ever going that way until the daughter of the giant of Windy Gap cried out it was the thing she saw, a grain of barley on the air behind them far away. They were going and ever going after that until she cried out again it was the thing she saw, a ball of wool, and after that a black cloud, and, "It is the flying ship of the cailleach of the long tooth and herself in it," she cried, and "O son of the King of Ireland, my soul within, we are destroyed surely."

"Let not fear or anxiety be on you, O fair daughter of the giant of Windy Gap," said the little red dog, said he, "and let you listen to me, O son of the King of Ireland. Take the apple won from the Golden Garden at you and put it into the sling, and cast a straight, very-piercing shot at the cailleach, but on your soul do not fail to strike the hollow gap between her two eyes, for it is there her soul does be ever in its sitting. If it fails you to do that thing you will get shortening of life and the pangs of death surely!"

The King of Ireland's son took the apple won at him from the Golden Garden, and put it in the sling and cast a very straight, truly-piercing shot at the cailleach of the long tooth, and it did not fail him to strike the hollow gap between her two eyes, the way the little red dog had said, so that she fell headlong out of the ship and she dead, without life.

"They were near their own place then, and the court of the King of Ireland. There were nine thousand towers of welcome before them, and a great noble company on the green of the estate. All the Fianna Eirinn were in it, and my father's

son also. The King of Ireland's son and the daughter of the giant of Windy Gap were wedded that night, and they used the night one-third feasting, one-third in the telling of Fenian tales, and one-third in the clouds of sleep and truly soft slumber. I saw a mare's nest in the high branches, and a fish singing, but all I got were stockings of thick milk and glass breeches. They got the ford and I the stepping stones. They were drowned and I came safe."

The voice of the reciter, a tall young man with long black hair tumbling about his eyes, fell listlessly. His head drooping to his thin hands, he began to sob softly, overcome by the memory of some telling of the same tale in happier days. One of his two listeners groaned almost inaudibly in conventional approval of the entertainment.

On the floor of a miserable hovel of mud and stones, but principally of mud, the three prisoners crouched in the trampled dirt and offal, and huddled together for warmth. Their heads were bare to a sky like sodden lead, darkening rapidly in a dusk that seemed to tumble headlong. The thatch of the cabin had been burnt away, and the three uninjured walls were charred

and oozing with black sticky streams. The remaining side, that facing the west, had partially crumbled, and from time to time a damp wind swept shrewdly over the long soaked flats between the village and the sea, and shook the dank rags about the bodies of the crouching men. Splintered and rotten rafters fallen from the wreck of the roof lay upon the floor in the midst of evil-smelling pools of liquid manure and other garbage, for before the capture of the previous afternoon this anatomy of a human habitation had been used by the English for the quartering of their horses. The invaders, goaded by an insensate itch for devastation, often greatly inconvenienced themselves by wanton burnings of farms and other dwelling houses, thus depriving themselves of any place of shelter during the stress of a long encampment. In the present instance the captives had been bestowed in this place of flimsy protection not from any compassion for their nakedness, but for their more secure custody in the event, unlikely enough, of another sortie from the town under the driving mist of the night.

Beyond the door a smoky fire had been

kindled, and five or six guards stamped up and down, grumbling and cursing the weather and jesting obscenely among themselves. Within, the Irish prisoners shivered on the morass-like floor. Their names were Donough O'Sullivan (the Shanachie), Cathal O'Sullivan, and Michael Tuomey. Now and again they spat, their faces twisted awry, even those bodies, inured as they were to every kind of squalor, revolting against the rank fumes rising around them. They sat very quiet now, their lean knees drawn up to the rough tangle of their chins, and their eyes staring dully into the obscurity. Sometimes a wheezy groan escaped with a rasping saw-like sound from the chest of Michael Tuomey. He was a very old man, and his face of the colour of soiled parchment lolled heavily between his twisted knees, the long greasy grey hair sprayed out over the gnarled hands like sea-wrack covering sharp rocks.

Suddenly Cathal's posture became strained and tense, and "Go bfhoiridh Dia air!" he muttered beneath his breath, and crossed himself. A stirring became audible in the camp outside. Beyond the doorway one of the guards chuckled with evil glee. Another

growled, "What cause for thy mirth, ye . . . ? This merry show is not for thee, thou and I be swineherds till to-morn." He jerked his thumb backwards towards the hut. Further confused noises and a voice drawled a command. The very accents seemed to be flavoured with perfume, to be penetrated with the softness and lassitude of silk. Donough's eyes glittered. He struggled to his knees and clenched his fingers into the palms of his hands until the long ragged nails almost broke the flesh.

"Still, boy, still," whispered Cathal, an unnatural exultation making his lip tremulous; "the shadow will fall on his eyes more sweetly than the suns of God in Spring on the slopes of Benoskee. He will drink of the Wells of peace in the bright dawn of day. Death is the true comrade of that one's heart, surely!"

Donough stared at him, like young eyes widening in horror of another guest in the house of his fellow-sufferer's soul, more dreadful than famine and pain. He had no doubt that Cathal was mad. "Look to the fire, Jock," shouted one of the men outside. "It were a pity even for the pigs to miss the funning. Hearken, lads, to their grunt-

ing!" His dirty red face grinned round the corner of the wall, and with his tongue clucking he imitated the sound of a swineherd calling to his drove. Old Tuomey, wearied out with hunger and fatigue, dozed restlessly, heedless of the din.

The guard's eye glittered with malicious glee. "Ho! ho! the whoreson old boar's idle, meseems. Hey, stir yourself now; I'll goad ye, I'll warrant!" He prodded at the sleeper with the point of his pike so that Michael Tuomey rolled over sideways in the slime with a broken gasp. Donough snarled and almost staggered to his feet, but Cathal Mór held him down. "Time enough, a-vic, time enough!" he whispered, bending his huge weight above the writhing form of the younger man. In the darkness without the tramp and clanking of armed men neared. The rekindled fire jetted a fountain of sparks into the night through a lurid columnar glare, in which the drops of fine wind-driven rain glittered for an instant like jewels before vanishing into the obscurity. By this light the captive Irish discerned their comrade distinctly for a moment as he tottered past impelled by kicks and blows from the men behind him. At the door of

the cabin he turned his face, a livid mask of terror, the slack, chattering lips and rolling eye-balls cruelly illuminated by the climbing flame.

"Courage, O pulse of my heart," shouted Cathal. "To-night it is great sleeping you will be having surely, and you with your brown head on the lime-white breast of Maurya in the blossoming plains about the liss of God."

His eyes glittered strangely; more than ever was Donough convinced that his companion's reason was shattered.

But the doomed man did not heed him, staring beyond him instead at the form of old Tuomey, who had struggled into a sitting posture, and was rubbing the filth and sleep from his almost sightless eyes. Suddenly the poor wretch's already distorted features collapsed in a horrible grimace, his eyes seemed starting from their sockets, and he dropped fainting on his knees. There was a bestial roar from the troopers around him. Some one pricked him in the nape of the neck with a sword. Another singed his left ear with the flame of a torch. He was kicked and buffeted to his feet, and hurried forward out of sight. Cathal's fingers tightened

about the wrists of his young companion. But there was no need for this precaution. Overcome by unnatural excitement and the pestilential fumes arising from the floor a sudden weakness and nausea seized Donough, and, turning over feebly on one side, he retched painfully attempting to vomit. But in his starved condition that was impossible, and after a few moments he fell back with his head on Cathal's knees, his dry throat rattling and choking miserably. He lay there motionless, weakly groaning from time to time, whilst the firelight waned, pouring heavy pillars of green smoke into the humid night. The guards outside growled discontentedly amongst themselves, until a voice rose with a sudden horrible cheerfulness—"T'oald lahd's not the wún to mar a bit o' pläy, if Ah knaw un' raghtly. Ah'll have un coot dahn afoore t'lahfe's out o' un, Ah'll warrant thee, an Ah trow there'll be girt squeels out o' yon——hog, while there gutting un. A flaysome fella is t'captain; Caht an Raht Jackson he's clept over yonder in 'Ull, an' it's a proper name is thaht."

This was the fellow's manner of expressing the felicitous likelihood that the troop-captain's delicate humour would suggest the

execution of the second part of the sentence, "hanging, drawing, and quartering," before the fulfilment of the first.

It was almost completely dark within the walls of the guard house now. An occasional kick from the boot of one of the malcontents outside would cause a sulky flame to leap convulsively for a moment, invading the interior with a glare like languid summer lightning, and followed at once by a torrent of fantastic shadows, and an obscurity seemingly all the deeper for the previous illumination. The wind whined more continuously, and a sharp shower of cold rain hissed against the northern wall, and pattered on the putrid mud on the floor and on the bodies of the three Gaels. A low murmur mingled with the beating of the rain; Cathal was repeating prayers under his breath with rapid fervour, his eyes roving restlessly in the darkness, and gleaming like kindled sods in the infrequent flickerings of the fire. Old Tuomey gasped and wheezed heavily a few yards away. As the moments passed Cathal raised his voice a little, and his orisons became still more hurried. Suddenly every muscle in his body stiffened, and he paused, listening in a tortured expectancy. A voice

rose in the darkness not very far away, "So die all enemies of the Queen!" The guards exclaimed viciously kicking at the fire. Immediately a deep sigh shook through Cathal, and his body relaxed. In the dimness he smiled.

Then a low whining arose, mixed with the sob of the wind. The old Geraldine bard, Tuomey, who had remained motionless and silent, his head between his knees, since the passing of the troops, began to whisper hoarsely through his hair.

III

"Ochone! Ochone! What saith the old books? They went out to battle, but they always fell. My grief, O Eire! My sharp grief, O Shiela ni Gadhra. The silk of the kine is dark and tangled like wool ravelled in the spinning, and it is not the darkness of oil on the cards is in that darkness. A land of blood! A land of crows! The strings of our harps are rotted with tears! A land without keening, but the keening that is in the black wind from the north, that is edged like a serpent's tooth!

"What thing does the eye of the world

see? The stars dripping a frozen light on the snowy breast of Clan Cartha, and they turned up at the lips of bog-holes. A stake driven between the blue eyes of O'Sullivan's daughter, the star of learning and every accomplishment, the little blossom of the hawthorn at the beginning of Beltaine. O! a sight to draw tears from the bald eagles of the hill! Where are the lime-white courts of the noble Geraldine, the pleasant lawns where the young champions of the Gael and star-maidens conversed with courteous words? In the time of the great Earl there would be carven tables in it, and they bending with every choice thing of meat and drink. There was no shooler of the road would be let leave the gate with a loose girdle yon time. Now the lean wolves lick red stains upon the broken walls and trample nettles and thistles in the hall where bounty was dispensed. Monuar! My heart is like the flame of a candle that is blown down in a great wind. It moans with the moaning of ewes in a stormy gap and a black rain speaking. What voice shall answer only the screeches of the shrill sleek faery women, and they wringing their long white hands? The

shadow of the devil has swallowed the sun! He has torn the moon from the skies and cast it into Loch Ia that is without bottom. Och! ochone! There is rock within the heart of God, a blindness on the eyes of his Mother!"

The moaning voice broke, creaking like a rusty hinge, and the lean frame was shaken with a fit of coughing which seemed almost to tear it apart. Over the sharp knees the tumbled grey hair flapped like the plumage of some tattered crane shivering in a gale.

Suddenly he leapt to his feet, swallowing down the phlegm in his throat with so violent an effort that his eyes rolled like those of a strangling man. His shapeless feet reeling in the ooze of the floor, and his head plastered with filth thrusting forward with the malign energy of a bird of prey, he began shouting hoarsely, his claw-like hands stretched out before him—

"A day is coming, though it is long in the coming. I hear the black boar of old time grunting in the darkness of the hidden valley! Flame is rolled along the mountains like a wheel!

"In that day there shall be a red spate. in all the streams of Fodhla. Water rats and otters shall gnaw the lips of the oppressors of the Gael. Salmon and trout shall drink their blood in all the lakes of Desmond. Cumeendubh horses shall snort, their fetlocks shall swim in blood, the girths shall rot from their bellies. In green and fruitful Aherloe swine shall root away the entrails of the yellow Gall. The Babh and the Morrigu shall swoop down from the faery mounds; the hunger of lean ages will be upon them; the teeth of them will be like to the talons of a kite. They shall plough the bodies of the dead as a man ploughs a fallow field. Their eyes they will turn up as stones in a garden plot—the noses of them they will devour. Aree! aree! a red cloud will fall on their sense on that day—a blood-red mist on their souls. The mountains shall bend from their firm roots to mock them! Let you come, O day of death and desolation, O golden day of Eire's glory!"

The veins in his neck were blue and knotted. He cast his skinny and speckled arms aloft, the rags falling back from them leaving them bare. A little foam frothed

between his broken teeth. Another fit of coughing seemed to seize him by the throat like a physical adversary, and he fell to the ground writhing and choking, his fingers clutching vaguely at the tatters about his neck. One of the guards rushed in hurriedly with a torch made of twisted rushes dipped in fat.

"Stint thee of that plaguey brawling, thou old ——!" he shouted. "Thee'ld as lief dangle before thy time, methinks." His companions rushed in at the door hoping for some diversion.

"Let me handle the torch, Ned," cried one of them. "I'll handsel with the vermin; I'm not afeard of muck. Swounds! I'll give that mangy beard of his such a singeing as the lice will run from it. I will, by the soul of Martin Luther's cat."

"I' faith yon's a fair sweet bed thou hast, coz."

Said another, "I warrant thy head's nigh pickled a'ready."

"It smells a'ready o' t' stäake oover Castle gäate," put in the Yorkshireman.

There was a guffaw at this, and the rough side of their own wit swept them to a more complacent humour. With growls and

threats they lurched out again into the darkness.

All the time, heedless of the gross and violent scene which had taken place, Cathal Mór smiled serenely to himself like a child looking on a daisied meadow in June. Donough was by this partly recovered and sat up, biting his tongue to bring back the moisture to his mouth, and wiping the chill sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Cathal's face was faintly discernible. "Why do you laugh, madman?" he snarled at Cathal, with savage misery; "I'm thinking it's long enough now the sense is swept from you. Those others—God and Mary between my soul and them—do have the wits picked out of you." Cathal still smiled, staring at some blessed vision luminous to him alone in the obscurity before him.

"Ugh," grunted Donough with a snort from the back of his throat, "and the old stravager yonder would break the heart of the holy Michael himself, and he screeching like the flaming birds do be building their nests in the yawning gap of hell. Arú, my head's split on me."

He whimpered like a tired child for a

moment, and then, jerking up his pale face suddenly, demanded petulantly, "Who is that one at all?"

"Be easy now, child," said Cathal gently; "his soul is rasped on him, the poor man. The grief of life lies at the mouth of his mind."

"Sorrow is heavy on the wide ridge of the world," said Donough dully, with a strange, almost Oriental, motion of his arms.

"Maybe that man's sorrow is heavier than he knows," answered Cathal very quietly.

Donough stared at him a moment. Then the fury blazed again in his eyes. He spat.

"Ugh! ugh! riddles and laughter! torment without relief, and the screaming of carrion kites and ravens over Kerry's waste," he ejaculated, jerking the words between his teeth.

Cathal lifted a hand.

"Be easy, I'm saying; be easy, a chroidhe. I will be making these things plain to you," he said, and the huge form bent over in the darkness and spoke close to the young man's ear. "Does he sleep? Time enough, poor soul. Let you listen now. I will tell you the tale of that dead man outside (may

the white saints of God pray for his soul in its sore hour). Hard and bitter the telling!"

IV

"The Spaniards were after being slain and utterly mangled at Dun-an-Oir by an Crocaire Liath (the grey hangman—a name bestowed by the Irish on Lord Grey de Wilton), a grievous tale for the hearth-stones of Eirinn. It was after that time our dear prince—the lion of generosity, the true spring of every noble virtue—fled to the woods and caves of the mountains. All Corca dhuibhne he wandered—himself and his lady—and they in the latter end with but five companions and true comrades, an unfrocked priest, two riders, a kerne, and a young soft lad. Maybe you have it settled in your mind, and that without the word from me, that we were the two riders—myself and that other whom now, with God's will, a shining one does be guiding down the steep slope of purgatory. O Christ of the wounds! Sore the hardships of that time! (Hst! hst! does he yet sleep? Move softly, son.) Like the wolf before the swift hounds

—like the finch beneath the shadow of the hawk were we. One time—I remember it like the brightening of dawn to-day—the English came on us, and we boiling nettles at the edge of a stream. Thirty stout yellow-faced bradachs, with the necks of Tipperary bulls and buttocks like the rocks of the hill. I remember them, and they, passing a score of feet away, myself hiding in a whin bush with a thousand stabs in my flesh—'twas that was the sore lying, boy! May my soul never get worse!

"We heard them in the glen a little while before the sun lightened the yellow of their dirty cheeks between the greening boughs, but our dear lord—preyed on too greatly by adversity and the bitter changes of the world—took some weakness the way his legs were water under him, and there was not the strength left in him to move out of that. Faith! in the latter end the Lady Geraldine, that mild branch, caught him by the wrist and was dragging him that way till the two of them were up to their chins in the cold water of the stream. A matter of glory and great praise to God and his mother that delivered us from shortening of life, and the tightening net of the adversary for that hour.

"Monuar! a woeful time without rest! without comfort! The cold flag of hell was a warmer bed. In a loop of the loops were we! The place we cooked our food, that place we might not stay to eat it!

"But yet let you hearken, lad, a tale wonderful to be told! Tuomey was ever a star in our midst, a candle in a night of tempest, a true staff and prop of our affliction. It was often a house of tears was the wood or cave where we hid. In those times the old earl and his lady would be mingling lamentations between the showers of their grey hair—the kerne growling apart, and the gossún calling on his mother, and she dead and rotten since they bound her to an oak sapling in a wood of the south with her two legs broken at the thighs, and strung up to her neck by the strands of her long hair.

"'Twas then Carroll Tuomey would shake the mist of sleep from his two eyes until he would have some merry tale of Fenian forays told, and the laughter would be leaping in the veins of all like Spanish wine, and our sore case was nigh forgotten for a while. God above! That man was a horror, surely, for

travelling the untracked stony hills and claubery bogs would drown a ship.

"The might of Cuchullin was in his breast, the lepping and agility of Caoilte, the son of Ronan, in every shapely limb of him. It is well I mind 'twas many the time we others would be stumbling and falling among the holes in the heather, our knees softening beneath us, our tongues lolling from drooping jaws, and by sun and moon, my heart within! wasn't the lad ever before us stepping out straight and supple as ever he was? That one was a terror surely! You would say his heart was on the heights always. Sure a man would think it was his delight to be enduring those torments, and dangers would be more fitting the souls of the damned than living sons of the Gael upon the pleasant hills of their own estate.

"A strange man was that one—a stranger than we knew and sadder than is right for the children of earth—'tis God above knows that thing. The hunting of our bodies was pastime for blunt-nosed Sassenachs and Ormond's devil's brood, but—O little calf of my soul within—I'm telling you there was two-fold hunting after that one, for his naked soul was being scourged ever and

always through desert places and over bald hills. How came that thing on him, say you? Not difficult to tell.

"We were taking our rest one time in a fir wood high in the Dingle mountains—Coill-na-dulligan was the name on it, I mind. Myself and himself were drawn a little apart, and himself was working like seven devils cutting brushwood and bracken, the way the old earl and his lady would lie the softer. It came into my mind then to praise him for that high-heartedness and courage was a wonder to all, and fit to set the harp-strings of Erin ringing through the glens of time. Well, by the blessed scapular, what did that one do then but let drop the knife, and the tears fell from him like rain a storm would shake through leaves in summer.

"'Let you not be saying those words are a searing flame in my heart,' says he. I was staring at him then, and the two eyes starting from me, you may believe.

"'I am the outcast of the courts of the world,' he says. 'God spits on the place where I was born. The cold flag of hell is not deep enough for my like!'

"It was then I heard a tale a man might hear the pale ghosts chattering about lonely

lisses on the night of Samhain. A woman was in it—the fount of all contention—(they were true words the old King spoke in the morning of Eirinn's story)—and hot love. The two pillars of one arch were they—himself and the star-woman—and a great flame roaring between them. A night came, my grief, and those two under the one roof, and the two souls of them singing in the heart of a flower of fire. Came the old yellow hunter and his curs loosed for blood. Those two drew apart and found shelter—not in the one place—mo leun! It was herself was found—my lad hearing all—('twas the fine cover the son of malediction had found for him). The lust of life leapt in him. He smelt the sap of youth. He stared into the darkness, and it's what he saw a lake of blood, and in it a gap-toothed hag wallowing to the thighs, and she washing the scattered limbs of a dead man. He crouched without a stir out of him, his back gnawing at the wall behind him. From the pit of his dream he heard the thing passed on the floor of the house—O Mother of Perpetual Succour!—a thing not to be whispered even in the sorest hour of the women of the Gael. A weakness took him

—he lay still like a snail in a shell or a ciarog under a sheaf of corn.

"They went then brawling and boasting of the foul thing done at them, and he crawled out, the naked soul of him choked in the mire of shame. It was in his mind then to slay himself. He pressed the pike to his breast. But even then he was not fit to do that thing. Someway he could not look suddenly into the eyes of death, and he a man would sing the time his belly would be loose as an empty sack within him, and dance the hour another would be weeping down tears with weariness.

"A champion of the high race of Ith, a torch of hardihood, and a shameful weakling the poets of the Gael would be satirising from Ben-Edair to the Western Isles—and those two within the walls of the one fleshy house—my grief—a contentious pair—the mating of the hawk and the pigeon—of the red roving whelp and the gosling.

"'The wells of courage are too deep in this cursed shell,' says he, and he would be striking his breast then. 'Time is my need, for that is a hard and bitter drawing surely.'

"'Twas a long and sore penance the poor

man put in after that. I'll be thinking there's not a holy well and station he left unvisited in all Corcadhuibhne, and his two knees bare to the bone at the thorns and flags he travelled. For two days and two nights he contended with foul breathing ghosts at the door of St Gallerus' Oratory. At St Brendan's shrine on the bald height of the mountain he strove with the devil in the shape of a black crow larger than a heifer, and the eyes bleeding on him, and he in the hooded gap of danger always, for the yellow Sassenach was loosed in the barony all that time. Yet by the help of the powers he shunned battle with human kind, for it was too well he knew his own weakness. Well, musha, in the latter end he felt the protection of the hosts of heaven about him like a glittering shield, and after the red rout and utter affliction of the Geraldines he fell in on a day of wind and tempest with the broken clan that followed the old earl. It was that time myself met with him. From that first hour it seemed to my mind a shining light of high courage lit his brows. Where another would be putting down a foot of lead, you would say he was shod with the down of a wild swan's breast.

But a worse day was in the eye of God for that man. Came the last hour of the noble Geraldine. It was the month after Samhain, and the rain fell so ceaselessly that a man might say the Mother of Compassion wept tears down from her skyey courts, lamenting her children desolate, and the last black sorrow crying in the wind.

"It was in the wood of Gleannaneanty we spent the night, and we stretched out upon the drenched moss—God will blast those bare unsheltering boughs, surely, the way no green thing will shoot and no birdeen rear her young in those gloomy branches! Morning was after breaking, sodden, without wind, without life at all in the firmament—an empty stillness like the little space between the four walls of the tomb.

"Wakening, it is what I heard the sound of shouts on the slope above—then again shouts below. I leapt into my standing—the sword stirred in my fist like a living soul. Swiftly I wakened them all, the old earl grumbling, the cloud of heavy sleep still on his mind, and pains and shaking in his four bones. O King of Sunday! It was he was the pity of the world, his white hair drenched and clinging to his face, and

his two eyes like you might be seeing a child after starting out of sleep in fear. Before we could fly out of that they were all about us. They were blowing horns and shouting bawdy words for delight to mock our distress and pitiful case! I told Carroll then to stay by the earl and the Lady Eleanor, the place they were in, the time myself and the priest—a man better instructed in the holy Latin than in the right use of the sword—drew off into the wood towards the two airts from which most of the shouting came as I judged. We did that thing, and it was not long until six men broke through the underwood before me. My pity! what is one broken man against six fattened with spoil. It was quickly enough a spear-head found me. A clouding of the mind overtook me and I felt death groping for my heart, and heard, as it seemed to me, the coiste bodhar creaking through the wood. 'God's pity on the Gael and on my own soul,' I cried within me and faced out to the darkness. But my time was not come at that hour. The sense came back to me again, and I climbed a steep place up to the plains of life. Yet it was hardly but I fell back

again in that long hour in which I was trying to creep down to the stream the way I would still the thirst was on me and wash my wound. After that—hard the labour—I spied round with the sore dread on me before the thing I thought to see in the next moment. Under the protection of a whin bush one lay face downwards. It was Carroll was in it—dead, surely, I said—a hero's end. I was going to strength then, and with the pains of hell within me I reached him and touched his shoulder the way I would turn his face to the light. 'Twas then my heart leapt. A shudder took him as a small wind might put dry leaves trembling, and his voice groaned as it might out of deep earth.

"'Leave me. Let you go on out of that,' says he. 'I am filth, I am dung,' he says. 'My soul stinks in the nostrils of all right men. Black Kelly's curse on me eternally and for ever.' I stared at his back stretched out before me. Lad! it was then I understood him. May the Man above forgive me on the Red Day of the mountain; my soul sickened at the sight of him. Hatred and black loathing rose in me. I went away out of that as a man would flee from the

odour of carrion. In the wood I came upon them—all slain and stiff—the old earl's head severed from the withered body. That was the last end and utter devastation of the Geraldine race. My grief! my sharp affliction! The true props and defenders of the Gael! The candles of valour they were through grievous years—bitter their loss! We are like a temple without a priest, a cracked bell, a flowerless bush! Short the hours till your ending, O Eire!

"As for that one, I did not see him again until we found him lying at the castle gate at the beginning of the siege. And now he has gone gloriously to death without sense or use but for the saving of his own soul, may the hand of God be over him in this hour!"

V

There was a long pause. The fire had sunk so low that the two men could see nothing of each other's faces except now and again the glimmer of the gaunt edge of a cheek bone or the tip of a nose. The wind still whined fitfully, though the rain

had ceased. A very slow and regular dripping was heard as the moisture gradually collected over a jagged projection of the wall and fell to the ground in one large drop. There was no sound from the guards outside. It was likely that they were dozing over their pike-heads, yet the Gaels made no attempt to escape. Within their minds destiny pointed a plain high road.

"That one sleeps long," said Cathal, as though speaking to himself.

"The age does be a good thing an odd time," answered Donough listlessly.

There was another pause. The wind moaned as it seemed leagues away and withered into silence. The infrequent dripping from the wall was like the ticking of an immense clock. There was no other sound.

"He's a quiet sleeper, the poor man," whispered Cathal strangely.

Donough made no reply, but after a moment of silence so intense that it seemed to weigh upon that fetid place as though the whole black firmament were drooping down upon it, Cathal heard his companion rustle stealthily across the floor towards the old man.

"Waken, you," he whispered sharply and breathlessly. "It's long enough you've slept, old man. Waken now! Let you rise up, I'm saying!" There was a peculiar sound which suggested to Cathal that Donough was shaking the old bard. Then he heard the young man gasp, "Mother Mary! dead. Cathal, dead!"

Cathal crossed himself in the dark. "Those two will be the sure props of one another on the flags of purgatory," he said.

"Why that thing?" murmured Donough confusedly.

"The father with the son," answered Cathal quickly.

Donough uttered a breathless exclamation and then fell silent.

"Did this one know, would you say?" he asked brokenly, after a while.

"What way would we be knowing that, lad? God's mercy is great on the blind. But that other knew. Maybe it heartened him to his end."

There was a long stillness. Then Cathal moved suddenly. "The dawn is lightening," he said.

VI

Sir Thomas Carew, a most villainously scowling governor of Munster, sat in the library of Askeaton Castle jerking maledictions of abundant and recondite obscenity through his beard with great facility and energy. On the oak table before him lay a dispatch which, after much preliminary persiflage and scribal obeisance, ran as follows:—

"By unlooked for and most execrable mischance I doubt the consummation of the siege here entrained is like to be protracted during an uncertain period, saving only by your Excellency's favour we do receive further assistance in troops, for we are indeed in very durance and most grievous bondage of fortune. This morning we did set out in high fettle, bent upon the speedy subjugation of the town, and pacification of the inhabitants after the manner proscribed by your Excellency's advices. With us we carried two of the rogues of whose seizure I did advise your Excellency (one a grisly and most ill-favoured pantaloon having died in the night), and who did engage to bring us into the castle by the subterranean ingress of which

rumour prated. To make as little as needs be of a most doleful business, it was subsequently proven to me that there exists no such ingress, and that those two ruffians were bawdier and more insidious tricksters than I had afore deemed, leading us into the net of a vile ruse, whereby we found ourselves in sore discomfiture in a straight and confined space, and woefully exposed to the assailments of the enemy. Which they did render to their advantage most virulently, ravening upon the walls above us like the very wolves they are, and diligently casting down rocks and voiding melted pitch upon our crowns.

"Were it not for their ill equipment and the miserable condition of their nigh-starven carcasses we should have scarcely avoided from being annihilated to a man, yet by dint of shrewd fighting we did in the latter end compass a hard and perilous escape. One of our traitorous guides did unhappily escape to his lecherous fellows, but the other, a man of somewhat advanced years, being knocked over in the fighting we did bear away, and on reaching camp did serve him with the death his perfidies merited.

"The troopers were mightily entertained thereby, as indeed was most favourably ordained of Providence, for there has happed not a little grumbling on occasion among the knaves, yet beholding the protracted sufferings of that most hateful scum and heel-tap of mankind (if indeed such vermin may be so categorised) their fair humour did speedily return, for the which God be praised. Natheless we did leave dead some thirty lusty fellows within that vile ambuscade, a most lamentable chance. I do trust your Excellency will see good to send Sir Charles Wilmot or some other gallant gentleman to our succour, to expedite the fulfilment of this most tedious and ill-fated enterprise.

"As to one matter pertaining to this ploy, I pick my brains to no purpose, save only to their further confounding. I cannot but marvel that the man we first seized last evening was so witless an oaf and shallow-pated zany as he is proven to have been, electing to suffer torturing, racking, and death for the conservance of a secret which had less of substance than very void and emptiness. For meseemeth nought would have been easier than for him to dissemble

adventitiously to himself even as his comates did so vilely cozen us, the means thereto lying so near and patently to hand. Howsoever that be no great matter.

"Woe's me, this untoward adventure strips naked my five wits! Away with chiming sonnets and quill-scrapings until a more befitting occasion! May Almighty God protect the honour of her most gracious Majesty, and of England's realm. The undersigned has the honour to be your esteemed Excellency's most humble servant, EDWARD DENNY, Knt."

THE INVISIBLE CITY OF COOLANOOLE

THE sun set on a day too old to be recorded in the memory of any bard or seanachie of Erin's isle; a day that was haze on the limits of Time when, in a monastery whose very foundation is lost among the centuries' growth of darnels and nettles, the Book of the Dun Cow was traced by some nameless, peering monk; a day that perhaps was sighed over with the sweet luxury of long-past pain when Deirdre sang of ancient unhappy things of a summer evening beneath the blossoming boughs above Loch Etive. In the brooding twilight of that day the sea itself laughed and sighed with crazy youth, and the mountains' chasms, unstained as yet with the bright blood of Tuatha De Danaan or the hot passionate life of the children of Heremon, glowed with a serenity of innocent beauty since faded from the world for ever in the tragedy of ages.

I

In a wicker and wattle hut on the hillside bathed in the gleam of that antique dusk were four persons—two men, a woman, and a boy. They had been quite still for a long, long while, the two eldest, the woman and one of the men, squatting on either side of the wood fire in the centre of the hovel, their wrinkled knees huddled up to their chins, and their eyes, almost sealed up with age, staring unwinking into the core of the flame. Their heads were sunk in their meagre hands, over which the grey hair streamed like the tattered plumage of old herons or cranes. The other man stood motionless at the door, a bronze-pointed ashwood spear in his hand, and his young eyes gazing into the tingling depth of the mountain on the other side of the valley. In their deeps a grave flame burned, as though they mirrored some radiance more compelling in enchantment than that of the blaze above the dark peak of the hill. His foster-brother, a child of twelve years, bare-footed and almost naked, crouched in the darkest corner of the house shaken with

fear. Now and again his teeth chattered and he whimpered a little.

The hot evening was windless and the place so still that the most living thing in the room seemed the whorl of blue smoke rising in a serpentine pillar to the hole in the middle of the roof, whence it escaped into the air.

Suddenly the young warrior started. Far away from over the low ridge of the hill behind the hut the note of a battle-trumpet rang out. The stillness was so deep that this thin sound seemed slowly to invade the whole sky, thrilling sweetly across the glimmering vault to the very gates of the sunset. It ceased, and the echoes clattered and chimed fainter and fainter among the crags of the circling mountains. Again it shook through the silence, followed by and mingling with others of varying tones, a music that waked the air into wild life.

At the first sound the two old people lifted their heads heavily, and the man's scaly eyes blinking through the screen of the fire-light at the cailleach became furtively alive with a dim and mournful gleam. His speckled hands twitched feverishly as though groping for a weapon, and

he made a feeble effort to rise, falling back weakly on his haunches. He gasped and shook, the moisture running from his slack lips. In his corner the child began to cry softly. Running up to the old woman he fell at her side and thrust his head into her bosom.

"Old mother," he sobbed, "what does it mean? I am in dread. There is bitter dread on me before the great wonders of the world. It is terrible, I'm saying. It is terrible. I am so small and foolish. I do not understand." The cailleach's claw-like hands hovered vaguely about the child's head, lightly touching the long black hair. Rocking him to and fro upon her lean breast she croaked uncouth words of tenderness, the skin-hooded eyes blinking like those of a bird of prey.

"Still, a leanbh! Shoheen, my pigeon! The secrets of life are written on the shield of the immortal sun (that her blessing may remain with us all)! It would fail the champion of the world to climb thither, and if he did itself there would come a blinding on his two eyes and sure destruction on his understanding from that reading. The living are hid under the shadow of the

mountain of birth, and this life is a merciful darkness surely."

"But thou art so old," moaned the child (for these sayings were dark to him); "old as the mist, I'm thinking, and wise as the great grey owl does be staring at the moon in the Wood of the Three Battles. The people do be saying thou art a she-brock at every new moon and mingle with the folk of the faery lisses, and again an odd time thou art a kite and flying with the Riders of the Wind. Tell me now this thing. Whisper! Is the king a man the way of other men?"

The old woman shivered once and blinked fast.

"The king is the anointed of the gods," she muttered dully, "the fair-browed lord of noble hospitality, the giver of gold fillets and shapely torques to bards and sweet-tongued poets, the strong breaker of the ring of battle."

"Sure it's well I know all these things, old mother," the boy wailed fretfully "but——"

With a shrill scream he broke off shuddering.

The music of the trumpets, silent during the last few moments, awoke again very

near now—a brazen threatening blare that clamoured round the yet burnished mountain edges like the laughter of demons.

Instantly the young warrior uttered a cry, and bounding through the doorway leaped high into the air, flinging up his spear and catching it again cunningly in its fall.

"The king! the king! He is coming!" shrieked the child. "Hide me, old mother, hide me. I dare not look on him again. I saw his face one time, and it was little but I got death out of that sight."

The hag pressed the boy's face against the rags on her bosom. A hoarse croaking like that of a wounded crow came from her throat.

"Monuar! Monuar!" she moaned over and over.

Among the heather-tufts of the hillside the young man stood with fiery eyes and heaving breast. The ends of his fair braided hair glittered like polished copper in the gleam from the sky, and the enthusiasm that held him seemed to cloak his whole body in light. Now with the roaring of the trumpets was mingled the sound of a mighty trampling that shook the earth round the hut. Through the opening a

figure appeared for an instant, a shape so huge that its shadow deepened the twilight dimness of the room. The child concealed his face at once.

"The king! Cover me! Hide me!" he sobbed, almost voiceless, faint with fear.

The cailleach raised her head, but her dull eyes, straining towards the fading light, could see naught of the sinister glory of that striding giant, nor the radiance flowing from that crowned god-like head lifted to face some interior vision.

The king passed swiftly over the brow of the hill, followed by a host whose tread made thunder among the rocks, the faint fire from the sky leaping through the lifted spear-heads and tossed backwards and forwards like hay on a day of harvest. The young warrior, playing a hero-feat with his spear, sprang into the thick of the throng.

"O hounds of the sun," he shouted wildly, "take me with you to the gates of Coolanoole, the Invisible City!"

Fainter and fainter became the shattering din of the trumpets. The glow of the sky faded darker and dimmer in a wistful and strange beauty. The child lifted his head at last, and still pillowed against the

woman's breast stared at the obscure half-circle of light in the doorway. There was no sound but the laboured breathing of the old man and the soft crashes of the collapsing fire.

The light of day died out. Through the dark the boy whispered in fascinated terror—

"Where are they going, old mother?"

But the cailleach made no reply. Long after, mingled with the rustlings and patterings of the rats about the floor, there was a feeble stirring from behind the dead ashes, and a voice, like that of a phantom sighing with regret for lost delight, was heard in the stillness.

"The City of Everyman's Desire!" it gasped.

As though utterly exhausted by the labour of this utterance, the old man panted heavily for a long time, whilst his loose lips dribbled into the tangles of his beard.

II

Down through the crags and bracken and heather of the hillside, through the marshes and bogs of the glooming glen the army

passed. Not a word was spoken. Even the defiance of the battle-horns was stilled. Always at the head of the host, the long hair tossing like corn in the wind on his shoulders, the king marched forward with an even stride, changeless and unperturbed on firm rock or oozing swamp, his head ever raised towards the heart of the mountain that seemed to every eye throbbing with a new obscure life. Golden gleams awakened, and glitters of hosting spears, white flashes as of the tossing manes of snowy war stallions. Sometimes a flying shape, green like a dragon-fly's wing, or red as a meteor, leapt out of the confusion, swimming through the air and dying in the hill hollows. To every ear in that bemused army the silence of the summer night clanged with distant trumpet-voices of challenge. The blood sang in their veins, a crimson mist hovered before their eyes. Heroic echoes from other times goaded them with heartening mockeries, lovely ghosts of ancient hard-won love sang passionately in every heart.

The king turned back to his followers, his eyes glowing in the gloom like a beacon.

"On!" he cried. "O dreadful lions of

valour! Strike now! Smite till the mountains sway and fall. To-night you shall pillage the treasure of the world. In the red shower of loud-sounding blows the jewelled doors of the Invisible City shall become plain to your sight!"

Slogans shook the deep-rooted hills, the blood tingled to the crowns of black and golden heads. Like a moon-lit storm-cloud the army swept on. Deaf and blind it stumbled forward into the empty heart of the hill. Over that pitiful and tragic conflict the eagles and kites arose screaming. In the dying sky the disastrous war demons shrieked and gibbered as thousand by thousand skulls and breast-bones were battered and crushed against the lifeless walls of rock, and sweating limbs were broken in the ferny clefts, and mangled bodies rained down into the hollows of the mountain.

Up the almost precipitous cliff the king clambered higher and higher, whilst through the senseless stress his voice rang tirelessly—

"Aree! ho-ro! Little wolf-cubs! The walls of the Invisible City fall! We will feast in Coolanoole to-night, and our bright loves in our arms!"

III

Once again twilight brooded over the hills. In the hut on the quiet mountain side the child lay on the floor near the fire, burning with fever. The old man still squatted on the opposite side of the blaze, his cracked purple lips tightened in a changeless smile without mirth or meaning, and his blind eyes fixed dully on the red glare. At the boy's side the cailleach knelt, blinking down expressionlessly at him. Occasionally her trembling hands approached his lips, holding a wooden mether containing a little malodorous water.

"Where is Cormac? Where is my high-hearted foster-brother?" moaned the child restlessly. "There are dreadful things abroad to-night. Ochone! ochone! I see a man without feet or hands at all, and he running like a cat up the bald ridges and lepping from hill to hill. I see a naked girl and the nipples of her two breasts raining down blood into the heather like rivers in spring flood, and bloody tufts of her golden hair in her two fists like sheaves of corn.

I see scalding lakes of tears in the one place, and in another empty eye-holes that are aching wounds because it fails them to weep down the sorrow does be pricking at their hollow roots!"

The old woman blinked uneasily. She was convinced that the child had been swept by the faery raiders. Beneath her breath she whispered over and over again an incantation against elemental harm.

The boy suddenly began to scream wildly.

"My grief! my sore wail! It is the thing I see now, a foul, uncomely hag that wades up to her knees in a river of blood, and she washing the torn limbs of heroes. Ugh! ugh! the red tide foams to her lean spotted thighs! Pale heads float around her. Och! never a sight of fear comes but a worse comes after it!"

He struggled to his feet, as though to escape from an unnamable horror, his small burning hands groping before his eyes.

"What is this? ah—ah—a head swings at her fist by its yellow hair! It is the head of Cormac! I will not see it! I will not see it!"

The bare feet stumbled backwards until

the little body knocked against the chill mud wall. Leaning huddled against it, shuddering with ague and panic, the child struck at the air feebly with his hands, as if to combat some appalling foe. Across the embers of the fire the old woman's cracked voice began to screech at the almost extinct being at the other side of the hearth.

"Hey! hey! rise up out of that. Devils are loosed in the house. My soul hears the flapping of their black wings. They have the little one swept in their brood. Rise up, I'm saying, old fool; let you be rising up out of that, or it's choked you'll be surely in the smoke of their poisonous breath. Ach! golden-eyed Bel and the coloured winds of the twelve airts between ourselves and them!"

Mumbling to herself she plucked a live log from the fire with her fumbling hands and struggled to her feet. Muttering more loudly she advanced towards the dim white shape of the child, the sparks from the blazing wood streaming out behind her. All at once she paused. Far away on the hillside, as on the former evening, the sweet sound of the battle-horn rang out long and clear.

With a straggling gulp in his gullet the boy tossed up his arms. His body stiffened all over.

"The king!" he whispered, and slid to the ground with a flutter like a dying bird.

While the old woman fumbled at the pulseless heart, again the disastrous glory of that half-divine shape invaded for an instant the half-circle of the doorway, followed by a dishevelled and frenzied company, few indeed matched with the great army whose trampling had beaten sparks from the hill-flints the evening before. Like sounds in a dream a clamour of voices rose and fell—toneless as though under the sway of drunkenness, and through all clove the unrelenting cry of the maddened king—

"On to Coolanoole, the Invisible City! Down through the waves of proud-boasting ocean! O mighty salmon of valour, do you not see the white breasts of your secret loves heaving below the foam? They stand between the changeless doors of the sea. To-night they shall crown you with gold in the streets of the Invisible City!"

Plunging down the hillside westward his followers answered back almost drowsily—

"To Coolanoole! To Land-under-Wave!" and from the western dove-grey waste a hungry wind fled softly whining, whilst the low alluring sound of the tide washed across every heart.

IV

The last faint gleam faded out over the great hill in a sky packed with driving storm-clouds. A chill wind scuffled through the heather and whipped the black tarns among the bogs until the water frothed in the reeds like new milk.

Before the door of the hut a young girl stood hesitating. She peered for an instant into the cloud of wood-smoke with which the hovel was filled, and then, taking a deep breath of the night air, stepped over the threshold.

"Is any child of earth within?" she said, her voice trembling, and after a moment's silence repeated the question. A dull croaking seemed to saw through the smoke-drifts.

"The house of the dead in the kingdom of the dead is this. Away out of that, thou

evil branch of the light lusts of the faery-mounds. There is no dread on us before thee, I'm saying—thou waste froth of the sea—thou wreath of summer cloud—whatever form of ill thou art!"

The girl shivered again, though the hut was stiflingly hot.

"Where is Cormac?" she said.

Through the smoke came the sound of hoarse laughter.

"Arú, where is Cormac? she says! Ask that thing of the peist in Loch-an Eisg in the hollow of the mountain. Canst thou not smell death, child of the Sidhe? We are all dead here in the guest-house of the dead. It's fine and quiet are our minds, sure!"

The girl wrung her hands.

"Your words are searing wounds in my middle," she said, gasping for breath. "Cormac, the son of Muirchui, is my secret love, my bright share of the world!"

The other snorted contemptuously.

"Ugh! ugh! The noble son of Muirchui lay with no leannan-sidhe in brakes under the light of the moon," she retorted.

The girl beat at the crowding smoke-drifts with her arms.

"If you be a living daughter of sorrowful Fodhla," she sobbed, "let you have pity on the misery of woman. I am Findobar, child of the king."

There was a short silence, followed suddenly by a confused noise of panting and grunting behind the smoke, accompanying another sound which told the girl that some one was stirring the embers of the fire.

A bright flare leapt up so suddenly that the princess started back. Searching the heavy smoke veils that in the red light of the rush-torch were like convolutions of twisted metal, she saw the cailleach scramble with difficulty from the floor and advance towards her, driving the smoke before her in serpentine eddies that curled up fantastically about her form. Pausing close to Findobar, she thrust the torch so near the girl's face that the sparks singed the strayed ends of her fair hair. Then lifting one palsied hand she suddenly darted it forward with an unnatural energy and placed it heavily on Findobar's head, letting it remain there for a moment, and then slowly moved it downwards over her cheeks, throat, bosom, to her very knees. Then she grunted again.

"I am content," she said at last. "The sorrow of this world is in thy two eyes, oh fair girl. These are the ripe firm breasts might be giving suck to the sons of a royal clan. I feel the weight of noble gems about thy throat."

She paused a moment, and then, leaning forward and glaring into the scared childish eyes before her own, continued with vicious swiftness—

"Let you listen now, daughter of the king—thou lovely seed and deceitful image of evil and disaster. Cormac mac Muirchui, thy man, rides to-night in the grey host. He found death last night by a hand of stone in the accursed streets of the Invisible City. Thou dost not speak, king's daughter," she added harshly after a moment of silence. "Thy blood is not the chill blood of a seventeen winters' changeling. Wilt thou not keen thy hero as the women of Eirinn would be keening?"

But she got no answer. The young princess heard nothing of this last cruelty, for she had sunk senseless to the floor, her little hand clasping her breast, and her face like a drooping flower of spring.

Slipping to her knees in some terror the

cailleach assured herself that the girl still lived, and then rising again with a satisfied growl hobbled across the room.

In a moment she returned, clasping in one hand a long golden pin and a small crystal phial. Breaking the top of the latter against the wall she forced the girl's teeth apart and poured the drug down her throat. Then she thrust the pin into the soft weight of the golden hair, where it immediately became invisible, for the two colours were exactly alike. With great effort, coughing and wheezing the while, she dragged the little body along the greasy floor to the corner where the dead body of the child lay huddled together like a slaughtered pigeon. She placed Findobar against the wall, with her finely-woven dress dabbled in the filth of the floor folded about her limbs, and heaped a pile of straw and rushes upon her until she was altogether hidden. Then she stretched the boy's naked body against the heap, and trampling out the torch, crouched down again in the darkness, panting heavily.

V

A whole day passed by and nothing disturbed the stillness of the strangely inhabited shieling on the hillside. No smoke rose from the wattle huts in the valley or the pile-dwellings in the hill-lakes. There was no sound on the ridge of the world but the long-drawn wail of the keening-women crying their dead before untended hearths, and the whimpering of children complaining for lack of food.

Another evening more mournfully beautiful than any that had gone before slowly darkened the mountains, but no horn made enchantment over the heather, and the ancient rocks rang to no trampling of hurried feet.

Inside the house the old woman, huddled on the floor, mumbled to herself.

The body of the old man, who had died of a seizure immediately before the entry of the princess on the previous evening, still remained in its usual place. The dead man squatted on his haunches, the grey hair tumbled over his gnarled fists, seemingly no more nor less alive than he had been all

through the foregoing days. His attitude was that of some sage in appalled meditation upon a profound and tragic secret.

In the corner beneath the straw, and guarded by the pale body of the dead child, the little princess still lay motionless, enchanted in the sway of the faery pin-of-slumber thrust through her hair.

The silence became heavier and heavier. In the valley the starving children had wept themselves to sleep, and the women, their naked breasts bleeding from the frenzied lacerations of their own fingers, had sunk exhausted and voiceless upon their smokeless hearths. It seemed that the world had fallen for ever still.

All at once the heather beyond the door rustled, and a heavy foot ground on the flag in the threshold. For a moment the stranger paused as though hesitating whether to burst the walls with his giant shoulders, and then, stooping his head, entered the house.

Once inside he glared round wildly, his eyes blazing in the darkness like those of a marten-cat.

"If any live within the house," he cried, "let him answer. If there be dead men

only in this place, let them bestir their tongues, for I would speak with them."

There were red flares in his two eyes that seemed to glare down from the roof.

The old woman rocked herself to and fro.

"Would'st thou plunder the quiet host itself, lord king?" she answered with hoarse scorn; "thou scourge and lasting disaster of thy country, thou hunter of fogs and marsh-lights and nothingness!"

Hearing a living voice the king uttered a loud cry, unheeding and perhaps unaware of the cailleach's mocking words. Trampling in two strides through the very heart of the fire he stooped and seized the shrunken shoulder in fingers that seemed ready to crush the fragile bones to dust. "Listen! Canst thou hear?" he roared above her head. "Art thou a wise woman? Then tell me the path to Coolanoole! Tell me that thing, I'm saying, and may the curse of the wind and of the sun destroy thee, marrow and soul, if there be a lie in thy heart!"

He groaned thickly.

"My daughter, dost thou hear?—the white flower of the world—is after being stolen on me at the people of the Invisible City. My

own child! eh! eh! dost thou understand, thou rag?"

He rose suddenly, raging, and beat at the wall with his two fists until the blood dripped from his knuckles upon the rushes on the floor.

"I will go up alone against them," he shouted. "I will tear down their accursed golden walls with my naked hands! I will trample their deathless bodies under my two feet!"

He ceased suddenly, for a horrible sound arose from the floor beneath him. The cailleach had laughed. Staring stupidly down at her, he saw her turn and stretch one fleshless arm towards the dark corner of the room behind her.

"There is the path, lord," she croaked. "It's that is a sore road for thee, I'm thinking. Men say the dead bleed beneath the slayer's hand!"

She rose to her feet, whilst above the great blazing eyes still gazed at her in bewildered misery.

"Arú, why dost thou not go?" she screeched, and pointed again. Then with a short cackling laugh she limped towards the opposite corner of the hut.

The dazed king stepped slowly into the darkness, and stumbling against the heap on the floor, fell to his knees. His groping hands found the body of the dead child. Thrusting it carelessly aside, he suddenly uttered a loud cry, for through the straw and rushes he felt the warmth of a living body that throbbed softly beneath his touch. Furiously he flung aside the concealing grasses, and clasping Findobar in his arms caught her up as lightly as though she were a two years' child.

"Light! Give me light, woman," he cried, stumbling blindly to the hearth. As though answering this command, a thin tongue of flame licked up for an instant, and woke the glitter of something the old woman was handling as she crept stealthily and swiftly towards the place where the king stood, turning to her his enormous back and shoulders bent over the girl in his arms.

But at the same moment the man swung round, so that the passing flare might the better light the face of the enchanted sleeper, and instantly the gleam of the thing in the other's hand went out.

The hand behind her back, she paused,

gasping slightly. She peered anxiously before her and listened with strained ears.

"Findobar, white flower of the world! dove of my soul within!" sobbed the king with mad joy, and crushed his daughter to his breast, the golden hair streaming out over his arms to the floor, and glowing like ripe corn in harvest moonlight.

When he again raised his head the fury had gone from his eyes, innocent now with wistful wonder.

"Is it asleep she is?" he whispered. "What has come on you, my pigeon? What wonder-house is this? Speak to me. Let you speak one word only."

Even as he spoke the weak flame flickered out, and the hut was cloaked in the deep darkness of early night. A faint shuffling sound began, yet the man heard nothing but the question of his own heart. The wistful, wondering voice and the shuffling of the old woman ceased at the same moment. A great shout rang in the little house.

"A-ha-ha! Aree! At last I have won it indeed. This is the Invisible City! These are the sightless streets of Coolanoole! Oh, my sunny-faced heroes! That you

might rise up from your narrow beds and sing the glory of your king and his fathers for thrice fifty generations! For now am I master of the two worlds, the lord of the sun's wisdom and the treasures of the eight winds!"

He bent his face over that of his daughter.

"Speak to me, little golden bird!" he implored. "It is the warmth of life surely is in thy two soft cheeks, thy maiden bosom swells under my hand. Why dost thou not answer?"

There was silence again whilst he listened eagerly for some reply. Close to his elbow the old woman also stood motionless, the hand behind her back twitching. The crazy king began to speak again in a lower tone that throbbed with triumph.

"Ah, it was the sure knowledge I had that the stars lied not, and their quiet eyes signing to me out of the silence of the night, and I in the dawn of youth. Child, child, it was the thing they said to my druids, the high-king of the world's edge should take no rest or repose until he should rule in the liss and cashel of Everyman's Desire, and lay hands again on the treasure that all lose on the hard threshold of birth.

Faraor! my sore grief! is it not that dream is a quenchless, wounding fire in the breast of every son of woman? Yet is there no wisdom at all at him of the thing he seeks, though for its sake he cries down tears of blood in the night. Myself also, little share, I also, the chosen one, have known that same torment. Och! and it was then they robbed this world also from me, taking thee with their golden, lustful hands, and I alone in a land of blood and keening. But now thou shalt crown thy father and king, thou—pulse of my heart within—here in the high seat of the Invisible City!"

He paused breathless. The cailleach's claw-like hand touched his arm, groping softly round and upwards toward the shoulder. The king started with a gasp of delight.

"Findobar! Findobar!" he cried, "dost thou indeed embrace me with thy little hands! Listen! it is myself, thy father!"

With a happy roar of laughter he lifted the girl high and pressed her face against his own.

"The crown, daughter, the crown!" he whispered savagely in her ear.

"The red crown of vengeance and the gap

of hell to thee, thou child-slayer, thou pest and ruin of thy country!" shrieked the hag, and drove the knife in between his shoulders.

The king sank down with a groan, the princess slipping from his arms to the floor. At the same moment the golden pin of enchantment fell from her hair, and she awoke with a sigh to hear the king's last choking breath uttering her name.

"Father! dear father!" she cried in sudden, fluttering panic, and moved her arms feebly in the darkness seeking for him.

A dry bony hand caught hers with a force that so wrenched her wrist that she fell over on her back.

Motionless with terror she heard in the blind shadows a snarl like that of a wild animal.

"An end to this dragon's brood!" and in the next moment a knee, sharp as a pointed stake, was ground into the hollow between the girl's breasts, and two hands like the talons of a kite closed round her throat, driving the pointed rays of the torque deep into the soft flesh.

After this there were other rulers in Erin who fought and slew one another gloriously, and hunted the boar and wolf of the forest; but never again did king or ceann adventure against the Invisible City of Coolanoole, though the horns blowing from those towers of illusion make torment in our hearts from the first hill of youth down to the glen of the grave.

THE KING'S MESSENGER

King Cormac sat on the high seat in the great dun by the river Corrib one sultry evening at midsummer. The heat was stifling, for the day had been windless; moreover, the king had ordered that all the doors should be closed, since the matter of the council touched the very honour of the lord of the land. Somewhere in the heavy sky a thunder-storm hovered, and it seemed to the nobles standing motionless down the length of the rush-strewn floor that lightnings were housed in the eyes of their king. He gnawed one by one the four plaits of his beard, and the skin over the knuckles of his left hand that gripped the carven arm of the high seat was strained, making a white gleam in the twilight of the hall.

The company was very still, indeed so deep was the silence that though the place was thronged with men, the singing of a thrush perched upon a spray sweeping

the window in the western wall rang clear and cold in the dense air.

The nobles nearest the king's chair stirred uneasily. One made a feint of adjusting the buckle of his cloak; another drew in his breath with a long, sucked-in sigh, and expelled it again with a splutter; a third traced figures upon the ground with the point of his spear.

Distinct among them all the Arch-Druid stood, white-robed and of immense stature, by the side of the king. It was plain that he had just spoken, and he alone seemed unmoved, unaware or perhaps careless of the embarrassment that prevailed.

Suddenly the king rose from his seat with a gesture so vehement that the torque upon his neck tossed, and the golden bracelets circling his wrists clattered and jangled. A deep sigh like the first breath of a tempest passed through the assembly. Every man became rigid in his place, and every head was raised towards the high seat. The king's eyes flashed fire. He lifted his right arm, the fist clenched, above his head, and stamped upon the ground. It seemed that the storm raging in his brain would break, and launch destruction upon the company

before him. But after a moment the light died in his eyes, his arm fell loosely to his side. A greyness clouded his features, and he sank back upon the richly decked seat with a moan of weariness.

"I will not do it," he mumbled, and his head drooped on his breast.

A resentful and hoarse murmur swept over the hall, the caught-up breath of anger and dismay like the complaint of the tide dragged back from the mouth of a cave.

The Arch-Druid alone remained indifferent. He moved a step forward and addressed Cormac, his voice slow and toneless. While he spoke the sacrificial knife in his girdle now and again held the dull glare filtering through the windows, and glittered strangely.

"My son," he argued, "it is the will of the gods. These southern barbarians are a menace to the kingdom. They swarm on our borders like vermin. They outnumber the flies of a summer day. They reeve our cattle, they violate our women. They have even dared to outrage the altars of the gods. Comes a messenger from my son, the druid of Gort. Woeful his tidings. They

have split the stone of Judgments, and put out the undying flame of golden-eyed Bel. They have overthrown the image of the god and smeared the features with offal, while stakes they have driven between the eyes. They have even dared to fell the Tree of Magic—the hazel of wisdom—within whose bark dwelt the soul of the god of the holy grove. My son, it is time for thee to nourish these sacred deserts with the blood of the foes of the gods!"

The Arch-Druid paused, and the voice of the bird was again heard, a little careless jet of music that pierced the silence of the hall like a golden arrow.

The king muttered in his beard, his voice audible only to those standing close beside him.

"I will not do it;" and then after a moment, "Are not these Dalcassians my kinsmen?"

The Arch-Druid sighed softly, and then began to speak again. This time his words came a little louder and faster, and though he still spoke monotonously his chant took a higher note. At the same time the nobles and warriors pressed a few paces nearer to the high seat.

"My son, thou shalt! I have spoken with the gods. Two milch kine have I given to Crom Cruach, and a heifer and two calves to our master, the Shining One. The smoke of the sacrifice clouded the branches of the sacred grove during the length of the day, yet the earth drank the blood before the flesh was cold. Cormac, the gods are very wroth. They will not receive the sacrifice. It is for thee to open the doors of darkness that the golden eyes of Bel may once again shine through the foam of our seas, and that Crom Dubh may lift the shadow of his hand from our skies. Dost thou hear the voices of the gods, Cormac mac Ferbaill?"

At the last words the Druid's voice swelled like the blare of a battle trumpet, and then ceased suddenly. Complete silence again fell. The thrush had finished his song. Seen through the openings of the leaves which almost filled the windows, the sky was of the colour of burnished copper, as though it were some immense cauldron about to overflow in a poisonous brew of storm and disaster.

The king's head was still sunken on his breast, which heaved convulsively now and again.

It was becoming very dark now in the dun, and the motionless, attentive figures of the chieftains as they leaned upon their spears were like carven figures upon tombs. The silence had become unbearable. It seemed that the wheel of time was standing still.

Cormac slowly raised his head. His face looked drawn and white in the feeble light, every muscle was tense, and the sweat stood in beads upon his forehead. "I hear," he said; "but Druid, Druid, I hear another voice crying through my soul in sweetness more terrible than the growling of the gods on their cloudy heights."

He stood up, towering half a head taller than the stately form of the priest. "Let you hear me, Druids and princes, and champions of Conmac-na-mara." His voice rushed like a great wind down the hall.

"The gods made me your king, but first they wrought within me the heart of a man. And now if I might I would tear my breast apart that you might behold that heart and the wound that may never be healed. I have loved, and still I love, though the woman of my choice is sundered from me among the honey pastures of Magh Mell

beyond the shout of the grey seas. When the wind of death was whispering in the yellow tresses of Finobhar the queen, the shining blossom, she put geasa upon me never again to make battle against her people, and those bonds I may not break nor prey upon the clans of Dalcass, even did they wrap these walls in the flame of their brands! Ye have sacrificed to the gods the first-fruits of your lands. Now shall the king himself make offering to the sun and wind, and all the elements. I give the strength of my body in its glory, and the weakness of my body in its grievous distress to atone for my willing sin against this land. And now let me die, for I hear the voice of one who sings among the flowers of the Pleasant Plain!"

With these words the king began to lay aside the crown and the royal mantle, his face radiant as that of a child's lifted to the dawn.

But at that instant a lean and venomous figure leapt out from the company of the bards arrayed on the right of the king. His left eye squinted, and his head was set crooked on his shrunken body. By reason of this deformity he was known in secret as

"Congal Wry-neck," though in his presence no man dared to call him by that name, for his satires were more dreaded than those of the bitterest of other bards. Striking a sour discord upon his small black harp he began to chant harshly, leering evilly sometimes at the king, sometimes towards the poets and chieftains :—

"Woeful the dawn of day
On the hall of a thousand feasts,
By the river fiercely flowing,
Corrib of speckled trout.

The king of the tribes of the sea,
Cormac of haughty spears,
Hunted abroad by night,
The grey south wind in his teeth.

Dalcass of the thundering cliffs,
It was there he trapped the quarry,
From the bed of Murchui he stole her,
And the chief in the net of sleep.

He set her on the high seat,
Finobhar of evil enticements,
A rag from a beggar's cloak
On the bough of a noble tree.

On his couch he awoke, and it empty,
Murchui of the black tooth;
Not more swift the red of dawn
Than the flame of the hero's fury.

Three things hateful to just men:
A light woman to be exalted,
Dishonour on the brow of a king,
A land in submission to slaves!"

The dun rang with wild shouts, for these were no vain things that the satirist had sung, though few they were that knew the whole truth concerning the sombre and violent wooing of their lord. Whilst the crowd surged towards the high seat the king leapt to his feet, the battle-rage spreading over his face in a sudden red stain that seemed even to flood the whites of his eyes. Growling like a wild beast he dragged the spiked iron mace clattering from his girdle. The misshapen poet disappeared in the confusion, laughing shrilly.

Cormac, panting so that the sound of his breath could be heard at the extreme end of the hall, gazed defiantly upon the tumult of angry forms below him. The hall seemed

filled with divers-coloured flames as the sultry glare smote through the windows upon the restlessly shifting arms and jewels of the chieftains. Cormac's heavy mace appeared to leap in his hand like a hound straining at the leash. Every corner of the place was in turmoil.

The Arch-Druid made a sudden movement, and advancing swiftly to the king's side touched him upon the arm. Cormac turned savagely upon the priest as though to slay him instantly, but at a significant gesture from the latter let the weapon droop in his hands and bent his head. The Druid whispered in his ear.

The king started, and a strange and cruel gleam shone for a moment in his eyes. The Arch-Druid spread out his hands imposing silence.

Cormac, clutching the mace stiffly in his right hand and staring fixedly at some spot on the further wall, spoke slowly and deliberately.

"Well do I know that it is common talk amongst you that the gods have willed that I alone may prevail over these southern plunderers, else were my four bones bleaching under the moon and my ashes blowing

now upon all the winds. And now I will lead you against the foes of our country, even were the elementals of the seas and winds fighting in their midst. Yet before I go I demand that one among you bear tidings to Finobhar the queen concerning these broken bonds and the cause of my unfaithfulness. Is any man here so greatly the friend of our ancient land that he will dare to ride across the dunes of death? If there be any will so dare to pass those lamentable places, and kneeling before the queen will make known to her all the mischances that led to this my crime, then will the king dare to sin against the dead and geasa incurred in love's name."

Cormac leaned forward, scanning with feverish intensity the astonished faces before him. For some moments there was no answering voice.

Then the human tide gathered in one place into an eddy that swelled up the hall until a tall, dark-haired man was thrust forward before the king. His delicate features and small, shapely hands and feet marked him as of noble blood; indeed he was half-brother to the king himself.

Though not reckoned among the profes-

sional bardic class, he was famed for the sweetness of his music. Over his shoulders was slung a small square cruit. The king started as, peering forward, he suddenly recognised the motionless figure.

"Thou, Dathi!" he gasped. "My grief! my sore affliction! Evil only can come of this thing!"

Dathi stood unflinching in the almost complete darkness.

"I am ready, king," he said, his voice throbbing strangely with an almost threatening note. "For the sake of the land and the honour of the king I am prepared to die. But one boon I would ask before I go, and that thing not hard for thee to grant."

"My friend! My brother! Dathi, my friend! How have I offended the gods that ill upon ill is heaped upon me?" sobbed the king in his anguish. Leaning forward, he took the dark man's chin in the palm of his hand and tried to raise his face. But Dathi repulsed him quietly.

"My boon, King Cormac!" he said, keeping his eyes always on the ground.

His voice was low and hard now.

"Name it," said Cormac.

The harper lifted his head for the first time and looked into the king's eyes.

"That I may die by thine own sword, and let the passion of thy heart flash along the edge, Cormac, that its light may rout the shadows before my feet. Now I am ready to die, and sure it is with pride I go harping into the presence of the gods, the chosen messenger of my king and friends."

He ceased, and there was a long pause. The king remained sunken in the high seat, gloomy, brooding, seemingly almost forgetful, whilst he communed with the stony-eyed lords of destiny that knocked at the doors of his soul. Dathi stood quietly at Cormac's feet, though now and again his body trembled as though the heart within it were shaken by some secret tumult. The king rose abruptly. Dumbly he motioned towards the harper, and then towards his great two-handed sword which lay on a stool beside his feet. Then he bent his head in the direction of a curtained recess at the back of the high seat. Two kernes advanced and, taking Dathi by the arms, led him through the curtain.

Cormac groaned and covered his head

with his mantle. The silence of the thunder-charged twilight was one with that of the hall.

Suddenly a horrible and inhuman laughter rang out from beyond the curtain. The king leapt up, his eyes glaring like those of a wild animal. He stared at the recess, panting.

"Dathi, Dathi!" he stammered, "how is it with you? Men about to die should not laugh thus!"

The sound pealed again terribly from the recess. Cormac rushed to the curtain, but stopped short in front of it, shaking like an autumn leaf.

"Kill! Kill!" he screamed. "Kill quickly!"

The laughter ceased, and mingled with the broken sounds of a harp the choking voice of the dying man was heard crying with short, gasping, exultant cries—

"Finobhar! Finobhar! pulse of my heart! I am come. Thou wert mine before thou wert his! Thou wert mine when the royal gold lit thy pale brows, O Finobhar of the white shoulder. Ah-aree! thy lips to my lips! thy breast to mine! My revenge is a lean wolf in the night that scratches and whines at the king's door-post. Oh,

the taste of thy sword was sweet, Cormac! Finobhar! blossom of the stars, the tones of my harp are white hurrying wings in the shadows. My singing is the wind of the morning that my love breathes on the Pleasant Plain. See I come to you, O share of the two worlds!"

The voice ceased suddenly, and the clatter of the harp was heard as it fell to the ground.

Cormac turned slowly, tottering and groping blindly with outstretched arms. His eyes looked black and hollow as those of a skull, and there was foam on his lips. With a moan he fell to the ground.

It was then that the thunder-storm broke over the dun, and the lightning mingled with the torches of the Dalcassian marauders, hosting in all the doorways that fell in rent and crashing before the tumult. Amid the mingled shouts of rage and frenzy from within and without the hall was soon lashed by soaring waves of flame.

On the following evening all that remained of the troubled glory of the tribe by the river Corrib was a great mound of smouldering ashes and a thin cloud of

greenish-coloured smoke that drifted rapidly away in the cool breeze of the dusk.

(A belief still persists among certain savage peoples that it is possible to transmit a message to the dead by the slaying of an intermediary, who is bidden to communicate after death the desires of the living to those on the other side.)

THE VISION OF ST MOLAISE

In the early evening of a summer day the Abbot Molaise walked alone at the edge of the sea. Though trouble was far from his soul his feet moved swiftly, almost feverishly, over the smooth sand, red gold and glittering with faint rainbow hues in the level rays of the setting sun. As he wandered, hardly aware of purpose or direction, he smiled continually, his face radiant with a bliss that illumines the hearts of the more fortunate of men perhaps once in a lifetime. There was good cause for the lively ecstasy in the mind of Molaise the abbot.

That morning he expected to put the crown upon the master-work of his life, an illuminated copy of the Gospel according to St John. For six joyful, tireless years he had been labouring upon the manuscript, and now he thought of it lying up there in his almost bare cell like a precious gem in a desert cave, and page after page of the

thick, glossy vellum passed before his mind, the holy words decked and intertwined with his reading of the beauty of form and colour strewn by God's bounty through His most lovely world. To-night—perhaps before the sun fell down the bottomless gulf beyond the faery-haunted and dragonish western ocean—his work would be complete. He toyed with a certain voluptuousness over this anticipation, not yet a prey to the regret an artist feels at last when parting with his creation, of which the companionship has absorbed and solaced him through a thousand days and nights.

The book was by no means the first of the abbot's literary and artistic achievements. Long ago, whilst still in his middle years, he had compiled a "Hagiology of the Northern Hy Niall," a work framed in a curious medley of Irish and Latin, and since copied out in its entirety for the edification of the monastery of Iona, to the glory of whose founder it was dedicated. Moreover, three years since he had written in Latin (interleaved with Gaelic glosses) an admirably obscure and erudite treatise on the properties and attributes of the Third Person of the Trinity, utterly confounding

the needy simplicities of argument employed by the timorously heretical Bishop Finnen of Durrow. This had brought Molaise considerable fame among the northern churches, and had induced a trickling spring of vanity which the good abbot had dried up by the severest mortification of body and mind.

But never had art and piety been so indissolubly welded within his being as during the years spent in the execution of this his latest work. Thus engaged he came more nearly and intensely into communion with God than in the performance of any of his other labours—even in the administration of the Body of Christ at Holy Mass. The instinct of prayer and praise was in every touch of his variously-pigmented pens, every resultant beauty of intricately related lines was an answer from God, a token of the benevolent and lovely design inherent in the universe. Along every mazy line he was drawn by adventurous paths more and more surely into the heart of the Lord.

Whilst musing upon these divine mysteries Molaise's downcast eyes lit upon a shell upon which his feet had almost trodden.

He picked it up eagerly and examined its delicate spirals with grave delight. His eyes glittered. A new subtlety of convolution was suggested to him, a last invention to be woven into the profligate yet ordered confusion of his final page. He concealed the shell among the folds of his long white gown, and, breathing deeply, drank in the beauty of the visible and sensible world through mouth and eyes. This many-hued and multi-formed earth that he apprehended through his mortal senses, what was it but a manuscript written by the unfaltering hand of God, and what nobler work could the brain of man conceive than the illustration in microcosm of a scroll too vast and splendid to be understood by more than a very few of the elect.

For a space, the Abbot Molaise's soul overleapt the boundaries of his body. He danced in the sun-dazzle upon the blue and purple and amethystine ocean-floor. He rose in rolling whirls of jade and opal, and flung himself towards the feet of God in hissing fountains of golden foam. He fell shouting from the sky, and scourged the racing white horses of the tide, and blew up the sand in rainbow clouds.

Then a few feet above his head a seagull screeched suddenly, and Molaise's spirit relapsed to the confines of flesh with an abruptness that had in it something of pain. He frowned, and blessed himself hastily. Undoubtedly these white restless creatures with their discordant voices and malicious eyes were demons, offspring of Lir, the ocean god of old time, now chained with links of bronze many leagues in thickness to a volcano midmost the limitless sulphurous sea of hell. There were times when it distressed him that any living thing should be allowed to show disrespect to the anointed servants of God's bride on earth, that they should be suffered to defile the roofs of her monasteries and churches. In his time he had engaged in a controversy with St Molaing of Bangor, a very holy, but lamentably stubborn man, as to the possibility of salvation for the lower creatures. St Molaing had cited, among other instances, the robin that had plucked the thorn from the brow of our Saviour as He suffered upon the tree; also the white horse that had wept tears over, and been blessed by the great abbot of Iona on his death-bed, and had contended that these animals at

least had died in a state of grace. Molaise was hardly convinced, and maintained that the act of faith was invalid without the oral confession thereof, and that no evidence was to hand to support any theory that St Columcille's horse had been bestowed with the gift of speech. Nevertheless, he was tolerant of speculations such as these, and even harboured an advocate within his own community.

He thought of this man, one Brother Firdomnach, an anchorite attached to the monastery, who preached daily to the sea birds, standing upon a bare projecting rock, and so often drenched from head to foot by the green sea, that the salt had incrusted into the wrinkles of his bald head and among the folds of his already almost sightless eyes. But all were agreed that Brother Firdomnach was a man having strange windy places in his brain. Suspecting that the heathen birds were unacquainted with Latin or even common Gaelic, he had been heard striving to turn their minds through the medium of their own language. Some said that on more than one occasion he had been seen to leap into the air and remain suspended without

visible support whilst a man might count ten—a very terrible portent.

And meditating upon the maladies of the mind of Brother Firdomnach and insolences of the pious sea fowl, Molaise was horrified by a sudden suspicion of the imperfection of the apprehensible universe, and at the same time called to mind another torment of a hundred sleepless nights. For one evening very late, whilst he was labouring some four years back on the twenty-seventh page of his manuscript, a black cat, entering unobserved by the window, had suddenly leapt upon his knee, causing his hand to shake and a line to waver disastrously, besides sputtering some drops of paint broadcast on the page. Molaise had copied the page a dozen times, but had never succeeded in repeating the freshness and perfect balance of colour achieved in the original. He had been obliged to retain the blemished page, removing the stains as far as he could, and haunted ever after by the murdered line. The cause of the accident he set down to the agency of the devil, and since the master of evil is well known frequently to occupy the bodies of cats, the animal had been exorcised, and

afterwards roasted to death over a slow fire. No cat had since been permitted within the monastery walls.

For a few moments Molaise's imagination was cumbered with these thoughts of the inevitable canker in the fruits of beauty and wisdom. Then he sighed, bowing his head in contrition before the curtained will of God.

"My sharp grief!" he muttered with a sob. "Am I not deep tangled in the snares of sin? That the King of Sunday may forgive by his great mercy his presumptuous servant! Only that the lovely harp of the world were a little jangled, how should we mortals keep in our desire the trumpets and timpans of the angels among the courts of Paradise?"

So returned peace and joy to the spirit of Molaise the abbot, sweeter and sharper for the schooling lately administered, and with these divine gifts came a crying need to be again at work—to hold his creation completed between his hands, and to dedicate it to God upon his knees.

He turned back swiftly across the gleaming strand. An extraordinary excitement possessed him, his feet seemed shod with the

wings of swans. He marvelled at his former mood of discontent, for every common object that he passed on the way to the monastery now seemed a fitting testimony to the order and harmony of the universe, and a humble witness to the beneficence of its Creator. The coarse dry flowers tossing stiffly in the wind on the cliff track pleased him, the high-covered curraghs lying keel uppermost at the top of the strand, the nets spread out to dry on the rocks, the lime-whitened wicker huts of the students clustered about the monastery like bees around their queen. He noted with approval the spectacle of a few industrious monks still at work among the hay-fields, though no labour of this kind was required of them—according to monastic rule — between the hours of vespers and compline.

As he neared the outbuildings of the foundation he met two brothers bearing a yoke upon their shoulders from which was hung the milk vat of the monastery. Every evening it was the duty of these two monks to milk the cows, and to bring the great vat full to the brim before the abbot, that it might be blessed by him before use. Molaise, desirous that he should not be disturbed

later in the midst of his work, signed to the men to stop, and blessed the milk there and then.

At the gate of the monastery he fell in with a tall young man with yellow hair and hot blue eyes who was hurrying out, his arm pressing a leather-covered volume to his side. This was Æthelflead, a Northumbrian prince, who was studying for a while in this small foundation before proceeding to Armagh. The young man stopped short, uncovering before the abbot.

"What is thy book, my son?" inquired Molaise mildly.

"A Treatise of Boetius," answered Æthelflead with some pertness.

"You leap high, little calf of my soul, and you but on the threshold of the third order of scholarship," responded Molaise, smiling.

"It is the custom of my house." The boy reddened, and his wide-set eyes shone with embarrassed pride.

"An admirable virtue," said the abbot composedly. "Let your soul be exercised no less hardily than your intellect, and with the help of the King of the Elements

Northumbria shall light a candle in the dark north."

"That is ever my most earnest prayer," answered the youth with promptitude, and bent his haughty head reverently to receive the abbot's blessing.

"How wonderful is God's purpose, that he permits my poor hand to bestow a token of his mercy upon princes!" sighed the good Molaise under his breath as he passed on.

He hastened to his own apartment, his hands twitching and a wild music throbbing in his head. His body felt lighter and lighter, and in his chest there was a sensation as of fires running and climbing, roaring as though they would burst his meagre frame, yet he felt no pain. On the contrary, he was aware of a lively sense of physical and spiritual well-being never before known to him. It was as though his every faculty had become incandescent, set afire by the soft ecstasy of the declining summer sun. Swiftly he collected the small vessels fashioned of fragments of cow-horn containing his pigments, and set them out on a high trestle by the side of his writing-desk, gathered together his pens made of swan

and goose quills, carefully mended one of them, and turned the desk about until it lay under the most convenient light. Then after pouring water from a mether into a richly-decorated wooden bowl, and washing his hands meticulously, he went over to a recess in the wall and took down his manuscript, handling it tenderly as a father his best beloved child.

Setting the rest carefully aside he laid the final page upon the desk, and bending close above it, feasted his eyes upon the jewel-like marvel of his own exuberant fancy. His peering gaze lost itself in the labyrinth of lozenges and spirals, dogs' heads and serpentine convolutions. Here an angel's face with enormous circular eyes appeared startlingly in the formal fantasy, as though a sunflower lifted a human countenance; there a wolf's head gnashed crimson teeth. With an effort he led his eye to the bottom of the page where the last three letters of the word AMEN were shadowed in almost invisible dots of the palest yellow waiting to be elaborated.

With a swift movement he drew the shell from his gown, and set it on the desk by the side of the vellum page. Then he seized

his maul-stick, and holding it in his left hand in such a way that it supported his right wrist, set himself to work.

Yet no sooner had he executed a few strokes than he became aware of a curious bodily uneasiness.

The coarse texture of his undershirt irritated his back, his legs began to twitch. He shook himself violently and shifted his feet. He began writing again, and once more the tickling started, as though some hairy caterpillar were crawling up and down the length of his spine; again he felt the intolerable need to jerk his nether limbs, to shift his weight perpetually from one foot to the other.

He murmured a prayer, and though his habit was to work standing, he readjusted his work on a lower desk and drew up a high stool. But though he bent himself to his task with all his will he was unable to control his muscles and nerves. The sweat broke over his whole body.

"Christ of the Wounds between my soul and harm!" he muttered. "The adversary is abroad among my members. The old serpent unsubdued spits his venom on the white house of my soul!"

He laid aside the quill and stick and strode to the door, raging at himself for the evil luxury he felt in the free movement.

"Fergal," he shouted down the passage, his voice blaring like that of a bull.

A monk came running on bare feet.

"Brother," said Molaise, controlling himself, "fetch a scourge dipped in salt and vinegar, and see that you soak it assiduously. The will of the most high God is revealed to me, namely, that your immediate office is to lash my unruly and deceitful body until I bid you cease. And may your soul derive benefit from this pious exercise!"

"My Lord Abbot!" chattered the monk from pale, wry lips.

"Be doing as I command you," thundered Molaise, "or I will be putting a wasting worm in your middle, will gnaw your four bones and you living!"

Brother Fergal shuddered from the room, and by the time that he had returned, his legs like jelly beneath him with fear, Molaise was already on his knees, the white garments torn from his shoulders, leaving his lean back bared.

"Fall to it, brother," cried Molaise cheerfully, "spare not my filthy body. I may

not fail to admonish you that your worm does be already in the egg. Let you be mindful of our gracious Lord who scourged a froward and covetous generation out of His holy courts, and let your chastisement seek a lowly emulation of that divine act of wrath."

Brother Fergal raised a trembling arm. The lash whistled and bit vigorously into the long peaked spine of Molaise the abbot, who made no slightest stir beneath the blow.

The kneeling man sucked in a hissing breath.

"Harder, dolt!" he gasped through his clenched teeth. "Miserable craven! O most pitiful idler and skulker in the larders of the Lord's house!"

Thus exhorted, the monk increased in grace and hailed a rain of blows upon the body of the holy Molaise. When the abbot's back had become wholly transformed into a hideous mass of bloody weals he lifted a trembling hand and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Go now, brother," he whispered meekly, "and that the blessing of Christ and His Saints may light your ways."

The monk fled sobbing, and Molaise rocked dizzily for a time, supporting his thigh against the wall, drops of sweat mingled with the black paint, with which he smeared his eyelids every morning, dripping on to the rush-strewn floor.

At last, having blessed himself, he drew on his garments, wiped the sweat from his brow and face with the sleeve of his white gown, and turned again to the manuscript.

Taking up the maul-stick he tested the steadiness of his hand upon a piece of soiled vellum, gasping heavily from time to time.

At first fits of giddiness and sickness swept over him so that he was unable to control his right wrist with any certainty, but his composure returned by slow degrees, and at the end of a quarter of an hour he found himself fit to continue writing.

Before the sand-glass had run out twice the work was finished.

The abbot laid aside the pens with a deep sigh, placed the page beneath the others, and turned back to the beginning. There he had inserted the place, author, and cause of writing as follows :—

Molaise, abb. do scriobh
Causa scribendi: Ad Dei gloriam
honoremque ecclesiae sanctae suae
in terra hac
Anno Domini 790.

On the last page he had just written—"Beseech shortening of torment and of the hard pangs of purgatory for the soul of Molaise, a poor servant of God, who wrote this book with his hand for the delight and comfort of the men of this land nurtured in the only true Faith."

He sank back upon the stool utterly exhausted. To an onlooker his demeanour, his shoulders hunched forward and his head sunk between his two hands, would have betokened despair. Yet the soul of Molaise the abbot housed a great peace and joy. He closed his smarting eyes and emptied his brain of every thought. Only he knew that the urgency and fret of a thousand days had departed from him, leaving only the lapse and tranquillity of weariness without pain.

For a few moments he remained motionless, and then sank on his knees before a

rood hanging in a corner of the cell. Long he prayed to God in thankfulness for the grace vouchsafed to him for the completion of the act of praise fructified by his skill of brain and hand. Neither did he fail to intercede for the recalcitrant and sluggard soul of Brother Fergal, that frail vessel.

At last, enlivened by this divine refreshment, he rose to his feet and lovingly bestowed the manuscript again in the curtained recess. Red gold the soft gleam of the sun's last rays suffusing the window, and golden the waters of peace brimming the wells of his spirit.

Yet in his brain and body now woke anew the excitement that had disastrously swayed them earlier in the evening. He could not comprehend it. The devils had fled from him shrieking under the lash of the unwilling monk. Most clearly he had seen them, writhing outward from his quivering flesh and vanishing through the roof in brown and fetid spirals of smoke.

Yet now again the cell had become too confined to contain the energies crying within him. He strode down the passage, breathing hard through his nose. Every mortal faculty within him seemed strained

to breaking. He experienced strange physical sensations that he did not know whether to welcome or to combat as visitations of the son of malediction cozening him to degenerate luxuries and lusts. His tongue tasted delicious meats and fruits, and perfumed wine more delicate to the palate than any that ever trader from Gaul or Armor bartered upon the shores of Ireland. Fragrances of outlandish flowers assailed his nostrils, and piercing-sweet voices sang in the air. His shirt galled the wounds of his back as he moved—but the pain seemed less pain than a strange stinging ecstasy.

He had passed out of the monastery now and stood upon the top of the outer liss. As he stared down upon the glowing world it seemed to him that now not his chest alone but his whole body was full of fire. The flames roared all through him, painlessly burning away his bones and blood. He felt lighter than wind, all fleshly dross fallen to dust, yet still those delicate sensual delights remained with him. Terror and joy mingled within his being. Could it be that his unworthy soul had been chosen as the recipient of some peculiar enlighten-

ment from God? The sunset-coloured world lay before him, the mountains and machars and waters of his birthright; and the ever bewildering marvel flooded him anew that this lonely island on the ridge of the earth, neighbour of the damned and most perilous faery lands afloat in the western ocean, should have been destined by the inscrutable will of the Trinity to cradle every divine virtue, to flare the torch of the faith and of all noble arts and sciences to the mighty people of the world still groping in darkness. He thought with childlike amazement of the countless schools and monasteries thronged with the thirsting youth of the earth, students from foreign places, from Britain and Gaul, even from beyond the icy mountain walls of the south. Lords and princes, the future governors, temporal and spiritual, of the destinies of men. He thought of the cloud of wandering saints, candle-bearers of Christ, who had passed over the blue sea to alien countries—wherein the souls of men were manacled by demons—and had freed them of their chains, and had led them out of darkness up a shining path of grace.

"Surely, O Eire," he murmured aloud,

"God must reckon thee less common earth than an outer Court of Paradise, a lamp set between earth and heaven, unquenchable as the holy fire of Kildare, the shadow — mirrored in the sea's glass — of that heavenly hill whereon not alone men and beasts and birds, but likewise the very fruits and flowers sing with tongues, praising His Majesty!"

His dreaming eyes swept the dim purple sea to the great cliff that closed the bay to the north. There his gaze remained rigid and frozen.

Round the promontory and very near to the shore a ship was drifting smoothly and swiftly through the still water. A second appeared, and then another, and another, a countless host as it seemed to the amazed beholder. Molaise had never before seen the like of these great ships. Their prows ran up high into terrible dragonish shapes, and there were double rows of long sweeps quietly cleaving the waters on either side of them. What could this enchantment portend? These strange sea creatures were indeed most beautiful, but of what nature was the force that drove them so softly and speedily into this tranquil harbour of Inis-

na-Naomh? On what errand were they come?

And in the next moment, whilst his body rocked to and fro on the green ridge, and the foam broke from his mouth and nostrils, the vision of Molaise the abbot peered down the gulf of a hell more dreadful than any painted by the fever dreams of the fathers of old.

The rampart of time crumbled away, and through the breach the coming centuries were driven like a whirl of leaves before a ruinous wind.

The calm ridges of the sunset overflowed with blood, swollen lakes and rivers that spread in froths and eddies of crimson over the whole sky. It oozed up from the soil, from the dark meadows and shores, dabbling his feet where he stood, staining the wide earth. And up from the drenched grasses and ferns, from fallow field and plough land, from the bald mountain peaks and the wooded glens, across a long groan of lamentation, lifting and subsiding like a wintry wind, the five provinces of Eirinn keening to one another down the echoing ages.

And last he saw the whole weight of the

sea rear itself rigidly like an immense dun-coloured dragon towering above the land, and on its crest sat three naked and lewd shapes, and he knew that their names were Hunger, Rapine, and Slaughter. The great worm shook its head and flung those riders laughing and shrieking on to the soil of Ireland, and as they fell a cloud of forms still ghastlier and more foul sprang from their bodies.

The soul of the holy Molaise dropped through the rain of darkened stars, and the dead body rolled down the slope and lay in the inner trench, a small lean heap in a huddle of white and tumbled clothing.

An hour later the strangers, gigantic red-faced men, with hair like ripe corn in the midday sunlight, and ice-coloured eyes, thronged into the monastery and slew until neither man nor child was left alive. Then having ransacked every corner and gathered together all the articles of gold and silver upon which they could lay their hands, they tossed them clattering in a confused heap outside the walls, and set fire to the whole range of buildings.

And all through the night, whilst they feasted drunkenly on the strand, and roared

rude sagas of the disgraceful loves of Sinfjotli and Sigurd Fafnirsbane, and the flinty-hearted and lecherous gods of their race, the monastery blazed, and the ashes of the holy books and men drifted up to the airy deserts through a pillar of flame and green smoke.

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